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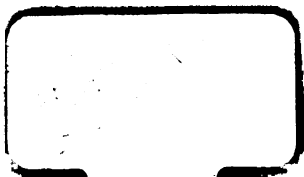
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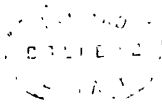
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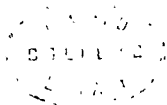
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**TO
MY DEAR WIFE**

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**TO
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THE BACKSLIDERS

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CHAPTER I

THE Adirondack train departed, disappeared behind a brown hill and left the Reverend John Gray standing on the platform of Pratt's Junction. He was tall and straight, smooth-shaven, clad in clerical black, and as dignified as a good-looking young man of twenty-five could be with a bulging traveling bag in one hand and a parrot-cage in the other. The bird had not found traveling pleasant, as indicated by his ruffled feathers and still more ruffled temper. He vented his ill-humor by squawking loudly as he swung on his perch giving sidelong glances with malevolent eyes.

There was only one other arrival, an energetic little red-haired fellow in a loud plaid suit. He had swung off the rear steps of the smoking-car before the wheels ceased turning, passed a check to the baggage-master, and hurried to a dilapidated stage-coach waiting by the track. He mounted to the front seat, from which he looked down with an air of satisfaction and triumph. "Redny" Feathers was a commercial traveler who prided himself on never "getting left."

John Gray had expected some delegation from the church to meet him, but there was not a solitary elder in sight, and he stood for a moment, uncertain, in the shadow of the rusty tank from which the water dripped cool and sparkling in the September sun. The car had

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been stuffy, and the minister was glad to fill his lungs with a long breath of mountain air as he looked around him.

Pratt's Junction was not attractive, a few scattered houses, a dilapidated hotel, a livery stable, and the smoke-stained, dust-enshrouded station. On the platform was a cluster of villagers, old men smoking contemplative pipes, barefooted boys, dogs, and young girls who had made pathetic efforts with their toilets in the hope of a long-range half-minute flirtation with some traveler looking out of a car window. The show being over, the spectators were departing, and John Gray, feeling decidedly neglected, stopped the station-master, who was dragging the mailbag after him, to ask,

"Will you tell me where I can get the stage for Wesley?"

Before that dignitary could answer, however, Gray's black bag was taken from his hand, which was seized in a huge palm and shaken warmly with —

"Sure, you come right along with me. I'm Jude Burt, the stage-driver, an' I s'pose you're the new preacher. I'm awful glad to see yer."

The speaker was a man of medium height, round-shouldered and freckle-faced, with an open brow and deep-set blue eyes. His clothes were faded to vague tints of brown and yellow, and hung loosely on him in spite of his sturdiness. He wore a winter cap with ear-flaps, and carried a whip in his hand. Jude was not the expected delegation, but John Gray felt a warmth in his heart at the cordial greeting of the stage-driver whose smile was like a benediction.

"My chariot's over there," he declared, leading the way to the stage and taking hold of the minister's elbow

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in a fatherly fashion. His smile disappeared quickly, however, and the tones of his voice changed. "Look-a-here, Redny," he cried out. "Git off that front seat."

"Not on your life, Jude. I got here first," argued Redny, settling himself comfortably, his dress-suit case against the dashboard as a brace for his short legs.

"Sorry, Mr. Feathers," replied the stage-driver cheerfully, "the Bible says the fust shall be last an' the last fust. We're runnin' this stage on Bible lines to-day, see-in' we've got the new preacher with us."

"Your text is a good one," said the young minister with a smile, "but your application is doubtful. I'm sure my place is on the back seat."

But Jude was firm. "Wait a minute, Preacher," he said. "I can't 'low Redny to run my coach. Come, Red, I'm tired of your foolin'. Git back, I say."

Redny climbed back reluctantly, and the preacher took the vacant seat with the parrot-cage beside him. Jude put the preacher's bag under the seat, threw the mailbag after it, and helped the baggage-master hoist Redny's big trunk of samples on to the rack behind. He then climbed to his place, seized the reins, and with a loud snap of the lash the team started. They rattled down the hill that descended from the station, enveloped by a cloud of dust, for the road was very dry. The grass by the wayside was whitened and the blue asters tarnished, but the bright yellow of the goldenrod shone undimmed. For a while the noise of the rattling wheels and squeaking springs was too great to allow conversation; but when they had left the straggling houses behind and the team slowed down to walk up a long hill, Jude began to talk. But first the parrot cried piously, "Bless the Lord," as if relieved that the jolting had ceased.

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Jude looked admiringly at Cæsar's ruffled green feathers, red tail, yellow beak, and bright eyes. "What part of the world did he come from?" Jude asked.

"He's from some part of tropical Mexico," answered Gray. "He belonged to an old sea-captain who was very profane, for the bird knew a great many bad words when he came to us, but most of them he's forgotten."

"I s'pose he's a reformed parrot now," remarked Jude; "but he don't look real pious, does he? He's sure got a wicked eye."

Feathers had not taken his suitcase with him, and the minister's legs being several inches longer, he found it uncomfortable against his knees and moved it so that it stood upright between him and Jude. It was so covered with hotel labels that only fragments of the leather were visible.

Jude examined it critically. "Tell me, Red," he demanded, "how did you find the folks in Cairo? You must have made a hurried trip to Egypt, seems to me. You was in Wesley only 'bout a month ago."

"I ain't been to Cairo, Jude, an' you know it."

"Well," continued Jude, "here's a very handsome sticker on your baggage of 'Shepherd's Hotel, Cairo, Egypt,' with a picture of the Sphinx lookin' out over the desert, jest as I used to see her in the old geography years ago. An', by gracious! right next to it is the 'Continental Hotel, Paris.' You'd be sure to have a good time in Paris, from what I've heard about it, an' from what I know 'bout you."

"Dry up, Jude!" exclaimed Redny. "I was down to the big city a coupla weeks ago an' there was a feller that had a lot of 'em to sell. I bought a few, thinkin' they might interest my customers an' help my trade. If I'd

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thought of the fool questions you'd be askin' me, I'd saved my money."

"Well, Red, don't get het up. I'm admirin' them. They look real handsome, but you'll have to watch out or they'll paste a cheap yellin' sticker of the Mountain House, Wesley, in among them 'ristocratic neighbors.

"There's the spire of the Wesley Church, right ahead," exclaimed Jude. "The only thing ag'in' it is that I'm a member, but you must n't take me for a sample. They certain did n't 'deacon' the barrel when they let you see me fust."

"They sure did n't," agreed Redny heartily from the rear seat.

"Of course," Jude continued, declining to notice this remark, "the Bible says, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.' It's my favorite text, an' I git considerable consolation outer it."

"It's a good text," declared the minister, "but we must not take it as an excuse for our shortcomings."

A little later they came to a turn from which there was a wide view, and Jude pointed out White Face, Gare, and McIntyre Mountains as they stood out plainly against the horizon. Then the road dipped and ran by the side of a pond surrounded by tall reeds in which the frogs were chorusing.

For a while conversation flagged; but the silence was broken by Jude, who turned to the minister and asked, "What do you think of the pair o' hosses that's draggin' our chariot?"

John Gray had been watching them absent-mindedly, and they certainly were an extraordinary combination. The off horse was a tall, rangy bay, so thin that her back was like the keel of an inverted boat, and her ribs the

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framework. She carried her head high, and when she trotted she stepped out as if she thought it was a real chariot she was pulling. The nigh horse was a muddy brown beast, flat-backed and flat-footed, long-bodied and slow-gaited. He carried his head low, and, in spite of the constant flicking of the whip on his thick hide, he scarce kept the traces taut.

"They're not very well mated," replied John Gray, smiling. "I don't remember ever seeing two horses so unlike hitched up together."

"Still they're closer than the mule an' cow Jed Small ploughs with up on the mountain. They're both real hosses, anyhow; they do thirty miles every day, rain or shine, an' they might be wuss."

Here Jude began whistling, "Shall we gather at the river," but this cheerful tune was shattered by a yell from Redny, who had been attracted to the parrot, and, wishing to be sociable, had put his finger between the wires of the cage and wagged it tantalizingly. He had not, however, realized Cæsar's quickness, and the curved beak made a vicious stab which drew blood from his finger and words from his mouth which no censor would have passed. From Redny's cries Cæsar caught a familiar word and he squawked "dammit," as fast as he could speak.

There was no mistaking the words which, uttered with great distinctness, hushed Redny with amazement. Jude's face was purple with suppressed laughter as the preacher soothed the parrot into silence.

"I am sorry he hurt you," said the preacher apologetically.

Redny grunted something unintelligible, with his wounded finger in his mouth, and the stage rattled on over the rocky road. The minister noticed how pleased

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every one seemed to be to see Jude; nearly all he met had something to say to him, and he never was at a loss for a cheerful or a sharp reply. When Jude spoke to the minister again, his thoughts had wandered back to his horses.

"Funny, is n't it, Preacher, how they always have to give a name to a hoss? Sometimes they give 'em jokin' names. The slowest hoss we've got in the stable is named 'Lightnin'.' I've given these two sensible names. That's 'Patience' there," touching the nigh horse with his whip, "an' that's 'Impatience,'" pointing to the off one. "I call 'em 'Pat' and 'Imp' for short. Did it ever occur to you how much matchin' hosses is like matrimony?"

"No," replied the minister, smiling, "I never thought of it before."

"Well," said Jude, "it's a heap alike. You scarcely ever see a man an' wife jest suited to each other, an' there's no such thing as a perfect mated pair o' hosses. Of course, a married couple don't need to look alike, an' it's principally disposition you have to think about. With hosses, there's a heap more to keep in mind — size, weight, conformation, color, gait, an' disposition. In marriage size don't count. Seems if the big man most often chooses a little wife, an' the large woman picks out a small chap for a husband. Hosses don't choose their mates like humans, an' it often seems to me that some outsider could do better pickin' than those most interested."

Redny had been silent for a long time, occasionally inserting a word. He now interposed with "Look-a-here, Jude, I thought you wanted the minister to sit by you so you could listen to his conversation. Why don't you give him a chance? You've done nothin' but talk since we left the Junction. You've discouraged the parrot. What are

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you goin' to do? Give up drivin' stage an' take the job of public matchmaker?"

"No, Red," answered Jude good-naturedly, "I don't want that job. Matchmakin' would be like peace-makin', an' I'd be gettin' a dressin'-down from both parties. Of course, if I took the job I'd try to hitch you up with Maud Green right off. You've played with that lady's young affections in a way that's scand'lous."

"I can 'tend to that affair without assistance from anybody," declared Redny resentfully, subsiding into silence, and Jude continued his dissertation on horses.

"This here Patience is a steady, strong, slow, an' lazy beast. I wear out a lash a month on him, not by poundin', but flick, flick all day. If I did n't he'd set down in the road an' go to sleep or crawl into the pasture an' eat grass. He's turned twenty an' will live to be a hundred. On the other hand, the mare is high-strung an' nervous. She pulls two thirds of the load till she gits tired, an' then she won't pull at all. Just sulks an' balks."

"Has she always balked?" asked the minister.

"Long's I've known her she has. Tom Lunn got her from some gypsy feller. They know how to fix 'em all right. She balked with Tom the fust time he used her, bringin' a load o' meat into the village. Now, Tom is both bad-tempered an' brutal. He pounded her until his arm give out, an' she was welted all over the back criss-cross like a cane-seated chair, but she would n't budge. Then he coaxed her, but naturally after the poundin' it did n't do no good. Then he hit on a bright idea. 'T was bright, in more ways than one. He got some dry grass an' sticks from the side o' the road an' lit a fire under her. Imp waited till she found the temperature was gittin' uncomfortably hot an' the hair on her belly was beginnin' to

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singe; then she took three steps forward, jest three steps, an' stopped. The result was that the fire was burnin' right under the wagon. The floor was gettin' well scorched an' 't was mighty near bein' a barbecue of beef, pork, an' mutton, all mixed up together, when Tom got presence o' mind enough to unfasten the traces an' pull the wagon outer danger."

"'T was a brutal thing to do!" exclaimed the preacher.

"It was," agreed Jude, "but it did n't hurt the mare none. Impatience can take care of herself. She's got consider'ble more brains than Tom, an' is more human."

The church spire had appeared and disappeared again and again as the stage wandered up and down over the winding road. It now rose up suddenly before them on the top of a high hill. It seemed to John Gray like an emblem of Faith triumphant over Doubt, and his heart beat faster as he thought of it as his church, the place where he was to deliver the message given him by God. He would do his best to make it a perfect church.

At the foot of the hill was a sawmill, close by a river which was crossed by an old red bridge. Jude pointed to the bridge and said, "That's Impatience's favorite place for balkin'. I've worn out a lot of the gray matter in my poor old head wonderin' what makes her choose that spot. Of course, she often does the round trip without a sign of stoppin', an' she's balked fust an' last at about every spot on the road."

Jude chirruped cheerfully as they came to the bridge and said, "She's goin' strong to-day, an' I'm inclined to think she'll take us through all right."

As he spoke, Impatience stopped short in her tracks. Jude chirruped to her, but she set her ears back and would not move. "Ain't women contrary?" he remarked. He

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chirruped again and touched her gently with the whip, and to this she replied by settling back on the whifle-tree and snorting.

The stage was immovable and Jude sat still and placid; but not so Redny. He now came tumbling out of the stage and began fussing around the balky horse.

"Dammit, Jude," he cried, "you've got to start her somehow. I wrote Crocker that I'd be at the store with my samples before five o'clock. If I don't get there then, he'll go home and I'll have to stay another day in this God-forsaken village."

"Careful, Redny," said Jude. "The minister an' I don't like swearin'. I can't do nothin'. All we kin do is to wait patient an' trust in the Lord. Hol' on there, Red, let go o' that bridle." He cried out sharply, but it was too late, for Redny trying to make the mare start, she reared up and backed furiously until the hind wheels of the stage brought up against the side of the bridge. If the railing had not been strong, she would have put the stage into the river. Redny clung to her, and the mare carried him with her. There was a crash when the rack struck the bridge, and Redny promptly let go of the bridle and, running back, examined his big trunk ruefully.

"Now you've done it, Jude; you've stove a hole in my trunk, an' you'll have to pay for it. Dammit! I'm going to charge it up against you."

Again Cæsar's memory was refreshed by the sound of the wicked words he had acquired in his "salad days," and he echoed Redny with a string of "dammits" as fast as he could speak.

"All right," replied Jude good-naturedly, "charge her up if you want, but you'll have a dum hard time collectin'. I've warned you to set still an' let that mare alone."

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To this Redny did not answer, but began tugging furiously at the hind wheel. "I tell you, Jude, my trunk's being ground to splinters. If that mare don't start, I'll break her bloomin' neck."

In spite of all Jude claimed for the mare's intelligence, it was hardly possible that she had a sense of humor. However, just as Red spoke, she rose suddenly on her hind legs, pawed the air, and then went plunging up the hill, carrying her mate with her and the stage behind her. Redny made a grab at the rack, but he missed it, and was left to finish the rest of his journey on foot. He did this most reluctantly after consigning both Impatience and her driver to a place where the roads were paved with asbestos and unobstructed by ice even in mid-winter.

So engrossed was the minister with watching Impatience's actions that he hardly saw the houses on both sides of the street until Jude pulled up with a jerk before a cottage on the right side and a little back from the road. It was a story and a half high, with a barn roof. It had a porch in front with four white pillars, over which a wisteria vine climbed. It had been freshly painted, the clapboards were very white, the blinds very green, and it appeared to be doing its best to extend a welcome to its new occupant.

"Here's the parsonage, Preacher," declared Jude, "an' I hope you'll have many happy days in it."

CHAPTER II

JOHN GRAY had been cradled in the lap of Saint Scholasticus. His father had been Professor of History in a little New England college, and his mother prided herself on being a graduate of "Smith." They had both died before John was five years old, and he had been adopted by Professor Elton Jones, whose mission was to teach Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. It was a large contract, but the endowment of the college was slight, the fees small, and its staff limited by the college purse.

John had acquired the three classic alphabets immediately after his A, B, C's. Instead of marbles and baseball, he had been taken on long walks by the Professor, who was not foolish enough to neglect the physical development of his young charge. The boy had always been called "John," never the youthful "Johnnie" or good-fellow "Jack"; though this was his misfortune and not his fault. The Professor had a horror of the normal boys of the village, with no thought of study except how to avoid it; and he watched John with an eagle eye, giving him tasks that occupied all his time. The village boys scorned John, not understanding that he was the victim of his environment; but they dared not flout him in the presence of his protector, who was a power in the college and the village.

John's life was uneventful. He lived with his guardian and one servant in a little cottage overlooking the campus. He had a few chores in the morning, chopped wood for the stove, and attended to the parrot, whose cage hung in the study by the window. Between the parrot, who had been christened Cæsar, and John there

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was a bitter feud. The boy had tried to be friendly, but, after his fingers had been many times lacerated by the sharp beak, he gave it up. To feed and tend Cæsar was for John the fulfillment of his Christian duty toward his enemy, who certainly did "despitefully use and persecute" him. John worked on his lessons until dinner-time and again until the late afternoon, when came the long walk among the hills, followed by supper and study until bedtime. Strange to say, the boy thrived in spite of all, and made no effort to break through the walls that confined him.

At the age of ten he had his first adventure, through which he passed with honor. On an October morning he was sent, unattended, to the store for medicine, and on his return ran into a group of village boys. They surrounded him and blocked his progress homeward. First greeting him with exaggerated cordiality, they followed by asking questions reflecting upon his manliness, like "Hullo, Sissy! Where'd you leave your dollies?" He faced his tormentors clear-eyed and curious, for he could not understand their unfriendliness. He protested when his handkerchief was stolen from his pocket and — used by the thief! He watched his hat wonderingly when it was thrown among the branches of an elm tree that overarched the road; but he showed no signs of anger until one, more venturesome than the rest, pressed a chestnut burr down his back. This was too much, and, maddened by pain as well as insult, he burst into a veritable Berserker rage.

He turned on his last assailant and struck him between the eyes with the Æneid which he held in his hand. It was a heavy volume, the blow a mighty one, and it felled his enemy to earth. He struck again and again,

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and when the book slipped from his hand, he fought with fist, foot, tooth, and nail, so fiercely that he put his enemies to flight and remained master of the field. He removed the chestnut burr from his tortured back, climbed the tree, recovered his hat, picked up his book, and the bottle of medicine where it lay unbroken in the road, and reached home safe — but far from sound. It had not been a bloodless victory. His clothes were covered with dirt, there was a big rent in the sleeve of his coat, and a few drops trickled from a scratch on his forehead. He looked the hero, flushed with victory, breathing hard from his exertions and with the smear of red on his brow; but he was not treated as was Achilles after the victory over Hector. His wounds were stanchd, but afterward the Professor took him "behind the wood pile," not even avoiding the bruises.

The result of this Homeric combat was that the gap between John and the village boys widened. He resented their unfairness and had for them something of the scorn of the victor. They responded with dislike, not unmingled with respect for his prowess.

When John was sixteen years old, he entered the freshman class. He was fitted a year earlier, but the Professor held him back, hating to give him up. With the intensive instruction which he had received, the boy naturally took the first place in his class, but made no close friends, for the Professor's ambition had grown almost into a mania, and every moment of the day was occupied by study. He was determined that John should set a mark in the college such as had never been attained. In this he was successful, and John was graduated with an accumulation of all the honors the college could bestow. So brilliant was his success that he won even the respect

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of those who scorned an ordinary bookworm. He was the "record holder" for scholarship.

When all was over he sat with the Professor in the little room under the light of the student lamp, and for the first time in his life John was given an opportunity for choice. Even this was circumscribed; should he become physician, lawyer, clergyman, or professor? No other career was open to him. He had no inclination for law or medicine. Between professorship and the ministry, he hesitated a little while; but on the following Sunday, Bishop Wayland preached the baccalaureate sermon and brought John to a decision.

The text was, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." The Bishop was fervent and eloquent. His purpose was to bring the doubtful ones to a decision, and to gain educated young men to fill the gaps in the Methodist ministry. It was the same appeal that Peter the Hermit made to "take the cross," and John accepted it with the spirit of a crusader. His heart was full of love for God and zeal in His service. He resolved to devote his life to the church without reservation or question.

With the disappearance of the Bishop, and under the calm counsel of the Professor, John settled down to the study of theology. He did not go to a divinity school, for three of the professors in the college were ordained clergymen, and his guardian did not wish to lose him. Elton Jones had trouble with his heart, which caused his friends much worry. A little later John relieved him from the teaching of Hebrew, then Greek, and finally Latin also. It was understood that this was only temporary, and with the hope that the Professor would recover sufficiently to resume his work.

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More even than the association with careless youth, scornful of scholarship, did the Professor fear the influence of women upon his charge. When a young man, and plain "Elton Jones," he had been crossed in love, the young lady very wisely deciding not to link her life with one so stern and dictatorial. It had made him a woman-fearer if not a woman-hater. He had fought coeducation "to a finish." He was barely civil to the wives and daughters of the other professors, and absolutely ignored every woman in the village. In the classroom, when he came to the fourth book of Virgil and the lines "*Varium et mutabile semper femina*," it was wonderful to hear him enlarge upon his theme. He discovered Schopenhauer's "Essay on Woman," which he read until he had it by heart. He delighted to quote such sentences as:

"They form the *sexus sequior* — the second sex — inferior in every respect to the first"; "It has never managed to produce a single achievement in the fine arts that is really great"; and, "A woman who is perfectly truthful and not given to dissimulation is an impossibility."

Above all else he enjoyed maligning woman's physical beauty, and quoted with delight, "It is only the man whose intellect is clouded by his sexual impulses that could give the name of 'the fair sex' to that undersized, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped, and short-legged race."

In connection with the study of the Bible, Elton Jones did not overlook the weakness and wickedness of men, but he took a special joy in exposing the frailties and sins of women. It was Eve and not Adam that he condemned for "the fall." It was Bathsheba that he blamed for "the sin of David." Poor innocent David who, walking upon his roof, could not avoid seeing the wife of Uriah in her

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bath! Emphasis was given to Sapphira's falsehood instead of Ananias's lie. It was Jezebel's wickedness, and not that of Ahab, that chiefly interested the Professor. Indeed, any female wrongdoing, of which he heard in the village or of which he read in the newspaper, always called from him the invective of "The Jezebel!" The parrot, which had come to the Professor with an evil vocabulary, had been reformed so that it only rarely exclaimed "Dammit" interlarded between "Amen" and "Bless the Lord." But frequent repetition of the words added "The Jezebel" to his dictionary.

The result was that John learned to scorn women as creatures elevated but little above the dog; for the latter had the qualities of faithfulness, sincerity, and honesty, all of which women lacked. Only once was there a chance that John's mind might be enlightened. It so happened that the wife of the Professor of English had a pretty cousin to visit her soon after John reached his majority. She was very attractive, and all the young men in the college and the village were at her feet. Even the older and the married men became more particular about their personal appearance. John only failed to notice her, and went about his work as if she did not exist. The natural result was that little Miss Ferguson, of the black eyes and trim ankles, coveted what she had not, and resolved to capture the young man who was so handsome and so cold. She might have succeeded had it not been for Professor Jones's interference. Realizing the peril, he called on the President of the college, declared that Miss Ferguson was seriously disturbing the calm of their Parnassus, and demanded that she be sent away. Elton Jones was aided by the ugly wife of the Professor of Mathematics, who appeared later in the same evening and

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accused the pretty lady of winning the affection of her lord and master. The outcome was that the President spoke to the Professor of English a few words which resulted in Miss Ferguson's immediate departure.

John had just begun to notice her, and a few days more might have caused his undoing. He was, in fact, "saved so as by fire," and only through his guardian's prompt action. At this happy escape Professor Jones breathed freely for a little longer, and then ceased to breathe at all. He passed away seated in his chair by the west window, his Bible in his lap and open at the first chapter of the Song of Solomon. He had all his life hungered for a woman's love.

When the old man died, John found himself filling the vacant place, although barely twenty-one years of age. He had been left what seemed to him a fortune, which made him independent of his salary. The only drawback was the request, that under the circumstances became a solemn obligation, that Cæsar should as long as he lived receive John's personal care and attention.

Teaching three dead languages to youths who had none too strong a grasp on their mother tongue was no easy task, but, trained to diligence, Gray in his spare moments took upon himself the task of making a metrical version of the Song of Solomon. The extreme difficulties it presented, with its departure from the ordinary Hebrew into the Aramaic, served but as spurs to his zeal, and he gave much time to the work, usually devoting to it an hour or two each night before he went to bed.

With his almost cloistral training, he saw only what was allegorical, and found nothing even sensuous in the glowing words of the Canticles. They were prophetic of the church "coming down from God, out of Heaven,

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prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." In spite of the centuries which had elapsed, Gray read Origen's Commentary of ten volumes, and accepted most of it. The "Bridegroom" was Christ and the "bride" was the church. Gray would not even make the concession that she might be the "believing soul."

His pupils looked upon their erudite young professor with wonder not unmixed with awe, which chilled the friendships that otherwise would have developed. He spent his mornings in the classroom, his late afternoons in the woods and fields, and his evenings in his study. He read indefatigably in preparation for his ministerial work, and labored over his metrical Song of Solomon as if each word were a jewel.

He was well contented with his narrow life till Bishop Wayland came again to the college and preached from the text, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." His eyes never sought those of John Gray, who looked up at him from the middle aisle of the church, but the sermon was a collection of arrows aimed directly at the young professor's breast.

It began with a description of the evil days which had come upon the spiritual leaders of the children of Israel, the wickedness of the sons of Eli, and the birth and education of the young Samuel. It told how the youth "ministered unto the Lord before Eli," and how, one night, they both lay down to sleep in the temple. It pictured the silence and the deepening shadows as the lamp burnt low. Then came the call of the Lord, "Samuel! Samuel!" and the boy, thinking it was Eli who spoke, ran to him. This happened again and again, and twice the old priest declared, "I did not call thee, lie down again." But the third time Eli understood it was the Lord, and he di-

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rected the boy how to answer; so, when the fourth time the dark temple echoed with the solemn "Samuel! Samuel!" the young man replied, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

The Bishop explained the sacredness of the call to the Christian ministry, the glory which attended it and the rewards which followed its acceptance, but more than all else he emphasized the sin of refusal and the greater sin of one who was false to his vows. His last words were, "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel." To all this John Gray listened with a set and expressionless face, though his heart burned within him.

The Bishop was his guest, and they sat together late in the evening in the little library. It was a cozy room, lit by the mild rays of a student lamp, and enclosed by tall bookcases from which volumes in sober bindings looked down solemnly. The two men sat before the fire, for it was raining and the air was chill. The andirons caught the light, and the parrot's cage shone in rival splendor. There was the pungent odor of burning hickory wood, but none of tobacco, for only the fire smoked. They had talked about the college, and of Elton Jones, who had been the Bishop's classmate.

The Bishop would have gladdened the heart of an artist in search of a model for Saint Peter. There was the sturdy, nervous figure, the bushy hair, the stern mouth, and bright eyes peering from under beetling brows, the eyes of a "fisher of men." To-night he watched keenly the changing expression of John Gray's face, determined that he should not escape the net which held him in the Methodist ministry. They had both avoided the subject uppermost in their minds until their conversation wandered to the subject of personal influence, Gray

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minimizing the power of one individual over another.

"And yet," said the Bishop, who had waited for an opening, "and yet, three years ago you told me that my sermon had persuaded you to become a minister of the gospel." After this direct attack, he paused for a moment, studying Gray's face carefully, and then continued: "Of course, I know I am not making a strong argument, for you have not carried out your determination."

At this challenge Gray flushed and the muscles of his chin tightened, but he answered calmly: "Not yet. I have not been ordained, but I have continued my studies. I am probably as well prepared as most men of my age for the Methodist ministry." He said this a little defiantly, looking straight into the Bishop's eyes. "I still have the same determination. I have not been false to my vow. I found nothing in your sermon in which I could discover a personal application."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I have my work here. I am only twenty-four years old."

"At your age I had been preaching three years," declared the Bishop. "Unless you arouse yourself you are in danger of following in the footsteps of Elton Jones. He received the call, fitted himself for the ministry, and took the professorship, as he thought, for a year only. Yet he died, never having preached a sermon in the name of the Lord. His life was a failure."

"He had a good part in the preparation of scores of others to preach, if he did not himself," argued Gray.

"Yet he failed of his best; he was discontented all his days, and made those around him unhappy. His only love was for you, and, all unwittingly, he went far to spoil you. Here you are, a young man twenty-four years

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old, sitting in carpet slippers before the fire, with a parrot for your sole companion who cries 'Amen' and 'Dammit' in the same breath."

At this thrust Gray's cheeks flamed and his eyes blazed. "If I wrung Cæsar's neck and wore patent-leather pumps it would not change matters. What have these things to do with the question?"

"Nothing, of course," replied the Bishop, "yet they would make a better picture with a maiden lady, or an old man whose work was ended."

To this Gray did not trust himself to reply, for the speaker was his guest as well as a bishop, and at this moment the parrot cried "Dammit!" with an almost human intelligence and understanding of the dialogue to which he was listening from his swinging perch.

"With all your learning you know less of life than many boys of half your age. Life is the great teacher, Life and Love. Even if you were not pledged to the ministry, you could not vegetate here. Have you ever loved a woman?"

John Gray did not often give way to mirth, but this question struck him as being irresistibly funny, and he laughed heartily and boyishly. "Never, thank God," he answered.

But the Bishop did not smile. "That calls for regret and not gratitude," he declared. "Without love, without a wife and children, a man is only half a man."

"Yet Paul got on very well lacking these things," suggested Gray. "He made a strong argument for the celibacy of the clergy, too."

"It was not a strong argument," contradicted the Bishop. "It was the weakest he ever made. But Paul is not the question to-night, or love or family. Did you accept the call of God to the Christian ministry?"

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"I did," answered Gray, looking straight into the challenging eyes of the elder man, "but I am not sure I was right, nor am I certain when I should take up the work."

"'Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation,'" quoted the Bishop.

"But is it the day when I should become a minister?" asked Gray. "You certainly do not advise sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice. Is not my best work here? There were ten men in this year's class who will be ministers, and half of them can translate from both Old and New Testaments."

"Good!" exclaimed the Bishop. "The Methodist Church needs educated men for its pulpits. You are a good professor. I believe you will make a splendid pastor. Whether you succeed or not, you are bound to keep the promise you have made to the Lord. You say you have conscientiously prepared yourself; you have waited three years; have you the right to delay longer?"

Not waiting for an answer, the Bishop rose, lit a candle from the shelf, and went to the door. Here he paused to say: "Think it over, my friend, and give me your answer in the morning. I can find a place for you in my conference. I have a vacant charge. There is a village called Wesley, named after that great apostle of Methodism. It is away from the railroad, high up among the Adirondack hills, and its church needs a pastor. I am sure you can fill the place worthily. May the Lord direct you."

Left to himself, John Gray threw a log on the fire and sat down before the brightening flames, determined to come to a final decision. First he asked himself, "Have I been called, as was Samuel to the special service of God, and as have many others in later days to the Chris-

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tian ministry?" His mind went back to the day three years ago when he had listened to the Bishop's sermon, preached with the purpose of persuading him and a hundred other young men to become clergymen. He realized that he had been influenced mainly by his emotions. But he certainly had accepted the call and had announced his intention. How far did this bind him? He was not sure. He knew he did not want to give up his post and to leave the little house on the campus, nor the cozy study. With Cæsar he could easily part, but the "parrot and the carpet slippers" still rankled. These words had been meant to move him, but he resolved that they should not influence him one way or another. He would be fair with himself and not allow his inclinations to influence his judgment as to what was right.

"How can I do the most good?" he asked himself. Should he change a successful professor into a poor preacher? Could he influence others by his life and sermons? He was very doubtful. He had preached several times in the Chapel and in the near-by churches, and had been praised. But he must come in close touch with sin and sickness and sorrow and even death. They were all strange and awesome to him. He must be patient with the ignorant and the foolish; and these he despised. No. He was not fitted for the ministry. It would be wrong for him to undertake it. He would not!

He would tell the Bishop in the morning. The clock on the shelf had ticked off the seconds and the minutes and the hours, while John Gray debated with himself, and it pointed to three o'clock. He rose from his chair and stretched his arms over his head, yawning wearily. He would go to bed. He had lit his candle and taken it from the shelf, when his eyes fell on the picture of a young

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knight in full armor, the red cross on his breast, and under him a huge gray destrier. He was a gallant knight, indeed, his face bright with courage and religious zeal. John Gray had seen the picture a thousand times, but to-night, as he looked, into his heart there crept the spirit of the old days when men left all for the glory of God, and laid down their lives on the hot sands of Palestine. It was with the soul of a crusader that John Gray lifted up his right hand and cried, "I'll follow you!"

Then he fell on his knees and spent a long hour in prayer. It was his "vigil at arms," and when he went to bed the dawn was breaking.

He said not a word to the Bishop of his experience, nor how he had come to a decision. He was quite master of himself, and announced his determination calmly and without emotion. The Bishop's congratulations grated on him, for that "fisher of men" was too evidently proud of his catch. Gray's mind was full of the dream of a perfect church, "without spot or blemish." But the Bishop's mind was on more practical things; he alluded to the pitfalls that imperil the young minister's pathway, and much shrewd advice he gave as to how, by little diplomacies, a pastor might become popular with his flock.

With the Bishop's departure Gray moved quickly. He went at once to the President and resigned his professorship, paying no attention to the consternation he caused nor the arguments which were advanced to persuade him to remain. Through the summer he made his preparations for departure, and late in August bade farewell to the village in which he had always lived and to the college under whose very shadow he had grown up. In some respects he was less fitted to face the world than a thirteenth-century monk torn from the cloister. His sense of humor

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had been almost stifled, his desire for companionship smothered. Intellectually, he was a fully developed man; naturally a student, his years of training had given him an immense amount of the knowledge that can be acquired from books. Simple living and regular exercise had developed a strong and supple body. He had inherited the regular features which five generations of New England ancestors had passed down from a young Oxford man who had left all for the sake of his religion. There was nothing weak about him, and nothing narrow except as he had been influenced by his environment. He was honest and open-minded, considering the restraint that had been put upon him. He had read about sin and falsehood and crime and suffering, but had no knowledge of them. He knew there was such a thing as temptation, but he could not understand its power. He faced the world fearlessly, conscious of sincerity and believing in a good God always at his elbow. His confidence in the ultimate triumph of the right was as serene as that of the most devoted knight who ever bore the cross upon his breast.

As the days went by, there woke in him the dormant love of adventure, and his face brightened, his step quickened, and the blood flowed more freely through his veins.

CHAPTER III

THE little Adirondack village of Wesley believed that the Sabbath should be first a "day of rest." However its inhabitants might differ in politics and religion, they were unanimous in favor of a long Saturday night, and reclined on "flowery beds of ease" until the clock in the church tower struck eight, and even nine.

The exception was Elder Asa Crocker, proprietor of the village store, who lived on the floor above his emporium. He rose, as usual, before six on a Sunday morning in late September, hurried into his clothes, and sat down to his breakfast in the kitchen.

The Elder was a bachelor, too busy to marry and too mean to support a wife. Instead he kept one servant, a woman from the poor-farm, whose body had been crippled and brain weakened by a "stroke." But Beulah could boil, bake, wash, and sweep; so he did not mind her contorted features, shambling steps, and halting speech. She "cost only her keep."

Asa bolted a platter of ham and eggs and gorged himself with buckwheat cakes plentifully anointed with maple syrup. However he might economize in other ways, he did not deny his appetite, and was a chronic sufferer from "dyspepsy." Washing down the final morsel of "buckwheats" with the last drop of coffee, he cleaned his plate with a piece of bread. So thorough was he that Beulah often considered washing an unnecessary task, and the plate found its way directly from the table to the pantry shelf. There was a thick pumpkin pie before him, but he was able to resist its temptation, for he devoted the early

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hours of Sunday morning to "writing up his books" — his one perfect joy. So "diligent in business" was he that a large share of the loose cash of Wesley flowed into his hands.

With a lingering glance at the pie, Asa wiped his mouth and beard on a corner of the tablecloth, rose from his chair, pulled on his boots, and slipped his arms into his coat. He had breakfasted, as usual, in stocking-feet and shirt-sleeves. He was at the door when Beulah spoke, her thick tongue stumbling over the words.

"New preacher — this mornin' — I'm goin'."

"Go ahead," replied Asa. "I s'pose he'll do his best with his fust sermon. Hope he'll turn out well, but he's too young 'n' stylish to suit me. I'd ruther had an older 'n' a married man."

"Heh, heh," cackled Beulah, "the gals — won't think so."

Making no answer to this remark, the Elder seized his hat and clattered down the stairs. He unlocked the door on the left of the hall, and entered the store, greeted by an atmosphere which bore no fragrance from "Araby the blest." The odors of decayed bananas and salt codfish triumphed over a myriad less pungent smells, and everything was drenched in the fumes of stale tobacco smoke. The Elder loved each single scent as a priest the incense, and threaded his way down the winding aisle between boxes and barrels until he reached his shrine, the little office in the corner. It was a dozen feet square, windowed so that the whole store was visible, and from it a side door opened into the post-office. As Asa fumbled at the key-hole, a big black cat rubbed against his legs, mewing a welcome, but the Elder hurried in and shut the door.

Asa was a Democrat, and the cat bore the name of

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"Billy Bryan," having been so christened by Asa's neighbors who disagreed with him in politics. His appeal for a caress receiving no response, "Billy" made his way to the front of the store and curled his plump body on a piece of woollen cloth in the window, where he could look into the street and be warmed by the rising sun.

Asa hung his coat on a hook, opened the safe, the tumblers ringing merrily as he turned the knob, and placed Day Book, Cash, and Ledger on the double desk that nearly filled the room. He swung his long leg over the stool, and minute followed minute as he wrote and figured. The light from a dirty window shone full on his face and revealed his hard features and the lines which toil and greed had cut. His nose was red and bony, his eyes small, his beard iron-gray, and his upper lip long and shaven.

Ordinarily the Elder's countenance was less expressive than that of "Billy Bryan," but here, unwatched, it revealed his varied emotions as he went from page to page. There was disappointment as he saw that Deacon Harding, who always paid his bills, had bought less than ten dollars' worth in the last month; there was anger that Abigail Green, who paid only when dunned, had run her account up to twenty dollars; and joy lightened his countenance at the discovery that Mrs. French, the rich woman of the village, owed him more than thirty dollars. Here his joy was qualified by a warning pain from the buckwheat cakes, and he went to a cabinet in the corner and took from it a bottle of Jamaica ginger. Removing the cork, he drank freely of its contents, replaced the bottle in the cabinet, his eyes watering from the fiery draught, and, looking at his watch, was startled to see the hands pointed to half-past nine. "Jerusalem!" he exclaimed, as he bundled the books back in the safe, shut the door with a bang,

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slipped his arms into his coat and his hat on his head.

So hurried was he that when he reached the street one side of his collar was turned under and the other reached up to his ear, giving him the appearance of a subject for the gallows. Murder was certainly in his heart when he discovered, on the window-sill, a lean and hungry cat, which he had once detected in the act of stealing a dried herring from its box near the door of the shop. The thief was a "Maltee," dirty and rough, who sat like Peri at the gate of Paradise, only a pane of glass separating the out-cast from "Billy Bryan," sleek and fat and comfortable. At the appearance of the Elder, the cat, conscious of his unexpiated crime, dropped quickly from his perch, and disappeared over the fence a few feet away. He was none too nimble either, for he barely escaped an empty tomato can which Crocker found close to his hand in a rubbish barrel and which he threw with unerring aim. It passed the exact spot where the cat had been a second before, and flew over the fence into the yard of the Elder's neighbor, Miss Abigail Green, the village gossip.

"Darn it all!" said Asa, as he opened the gate and rescued the missile from a rosebush where it had lodged. He turned and was walking silently away, when there was a cackle of laughter from the window of the cottage, the green blinds opened, and a gray head appeared, protected by a gray shawl.

"Look-a-here, Elder, if you must heave tomaters cans into my yard, throw full ones, won't ye?"

"T aint your cat, then," declared Asa, relieved, for Abby's tongue in anger was a fearsome thing.

"No," replied Miss Green. "If 't was, you'd 'a' had a piece er my mind afore this. My cat's a dog; it's only old maids that keeps cats."

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Abby laughed at her own joke, the Elder gave a grim smile, and started for the gate with, "Well, I must be goin'. There's heaps to do at the meetin'-house to-day with the new preacher givin' his fust sermon."

"The hull village'll be there," prophesied Miss Green. "They say he's young an' han'some an' got money. The young gals is 'bout crazy, an' Miss Smith, the milliner, says she done more business with new hats this week than any month in the year. I've put a new ribbon on my bunnit. He may take to me, who knows?"

The Elder grinned at the acid face above him and turned, as Abby pointed across the street and said, "There's the preacher now, in his garden." Looking where the bony finger pointed, he could see a black figure as it passed slowly between the lilacs and the syringa bushes.

"I s'pose he's some worried," declared Asa, "particularly as it's his fust church. I'd preferred an older an' a married man, but I s'pose the Presidin' Elder knows what he's 'bout."

"Whether he does or not, what he says goes. Speakin' of bein' nervous, the preacher ain't got nothin' on my Maud. Her solo has a note on the top shelf, an' sometimes she reaches it an' sometimes she don't."

"That's bad," said Asa. "Er course we miss Faith. There ain't no note in the hymn book she can't sing."

"I like that," cried Abby indignantly. "Though I say it as should n't, Maud bein' my niece, she's got a better voice than Faith Harding, any day in the week, not exceptin' Sunday. Besides, my Maud hain't disgraced herself. Why ain't you put Faith outer the church?"

"I've done my best, but Belcher an' French won't move, an' the Deacon's her own father. The new preacher's terrible down on backsliders, though, an' wrote us a

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letter a month ago that the church list must be cleaned of its dead wood. Faith comes afore the Official Board to-morrer night, with Jude Burt an' Fred Miller. I'm sorry you've got to come, too. It's a pity you talked like you did 'gainst Sister Lawton."

At this Abby tossed her head and sniffed indignantly. "I made a mistake, I know. I hain't got nothin' ag'in' Sister Lawton 'cept she's stuck up over her good looks. I 'polergized to her an' I can't do no more. You'll stick by me, won't you, Elder, seein' we've been neighbors an' friends for more 'n forty year?"

"I'll do all I can — without hurtin' my conscience," replied the Elder as he turned away. "'Mornin', Abby."

"'Mornin', Elder," said Miss Green sweetly, but she stuck out a long red tongue at the disappearing figure, and muttered, "'Hurtin' your conscience,' you old hypocrite! It's as tough as the piece of corn beef you sold me yesterday, an' that turned the edge of a knife. Besides 't was a half-pound short." She closed the window and, taking a seat in an armchair, continued to watch the preacher across the street, calling out to her niece, who was prinking in the bedroom, giving scraps of information concerning him and every passer-by.

Glad to escape from Abby, Elder Crocker tossed the can into the rubbish barrel, wiped his fingers on a piece of newspaper, and set out for church. When he looked at his watch and discovered it lacked but twenty minutes of ten o'clock, he took longer strides, the tails of his coat flapping against his thin legs.

The elm trees, weaving their pattern against the autumn sky, arched the wide street, but through an opening in the branches the Elder caught sight of the church clock pointing to half-past nine. He shook his

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head resentfully, and said, "Darn it all! Ten minutes slow ag'in." He crossed the street at the "French Place," grand and beautiful in the September sunlight. It was the only "Place" in the village, and every one was proud of it, claiming there was nothing better in the Adirondacks. The house, with its white pillars and green blinds, was set well back from the road, and the lawn was close-cut and shaded by fine elms. The gravel driveway swept, a curving crescent, from the street, and a path of flat flagstones led straight to the doorway.

Next to the French Place was the Methodist Church, its paint a little worn, its blinds a trifle faded. It was well proportioned and gained a certain dignity from its tall steeple. Its clock was a disfigurement, and, on account of its unreliability, the cause of many jokes in the village and of much sorrow to Asa. It was visible for miles around, and in its better days, before it "wandered from the path of rectitude," had been a standard for all the countryside. Why Asa troubled himself with the thankless office of sexton, it would be hard to say, for it brought him no money and little praise. When he reached the church, he ran up the steps, unlocked the door, and left it open to the morning breeze. He turned to the right, mounted a steep stairway until he came to a hinged scuttle, which he lifted with his head and shoulders. This took him to the dusty garret, with floor of lath and plaster and pointed roof of unpainted boards. From this he climbed the rounds of a ladder and reached the belfry, where he dropped upon the floor, out of breath in spite of his spareness and vigor. The wind blew through the lattice, cooling his hot brow, which he mopped with a red handkerchief. His hair was ruffled and revealed the fact that it had been parted on the side and brushed smoothly over

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his head to hide its baldness. Above him was the dusty bell, and in the center of the belfry was the clock, its machinery ticking loudly, its weights suspended by ropes through the floor, its rods reaching to the four dials, facing north, south, east, and west.

The Elder rested for only a minute, and when he had recovered his breath rose, wound the clock until the weights bumped against the floor beneath his feet, and turned the hands until they agreed with his watch. These tasks finished, he hurried down again, opened all the windows, and plied a large feather duster vigorously, beginning with the pulpit. He was well started when the clock began to strike, and he counted, — "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine." Asa counted "ten," but there was no corresponding stroke from the clock, and he said "Darn it!" in spite of his sacred surroundings. Then, not having sufficiently relieved himself, he said, "Gosh darn it! Them strikin' works is out o' order ag'in."

As he paused, uncertain whether he should climb to the belfry, there came the sound of rattling wheels and, looking from the window, he saw Deacon Harding drive into the horse shed with his brown mare and ancient "buggy." A few minutes later, the Deacon entered the church, whip in hand. He had once lost a whip, stolen from the shed during service, and ever after had taken the precaution of placing his "persuader" beneath the cushions of his pew for safe keeping.

Deacon Harding was a man on the shady side of sixty, of medium height, slightly stooping, and with broad shoulders. His beard was almost white, his hair iron-gray, his brows black, his mouth large and firm. Clad in a gray suit, the short trousers revealed thick boots, well blacked, but not shining.

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"'Mornin', Deacon," said Asa.

"Good-morning, Elder," replied Harding. "Everything all right here?"

"Yes, 'far's I know. Them back seats ain't often set in, an' might be cleaner. That key in the organ's taken to stickin' ag'in, an' may spile the tune Miss Harris's been practisin' the last fortnight. Nothin' else wrong, 'nless Maud breaks down on her solo."

"Well, that's something we can't help nor hinder. It's time I went for the preacher. I'm glad the clock's correct. I thought it only struck nine just now, but I suppose I lost count."

The Deacon departed unenlightened, and Asa, after raising a cloud of dust from the back pews, was giving an extra touch to the pulpit when Elder Belcher entered. He was a man of middle age, very fat, with a red face, curly hair, and a fringe of whiskers under his double chin. His brown coat was dusty and his vest greasy, his eyes were bright, and he had a contented and almost a jovial expression, considering he was an elder and it was the Sabbath day. The most remarkable thing about him was his voice, rich and sonorous. He led the singing at the prayer meetings, and even in church did not let the choir hurry him on a hymn he loved. He greeted Asa cheerfully, stepped sidewise into his pew, and dropped on the cushion with a contented sigh.

"Them flowers look pretty on the pulpit, don't they?" he remarked, nodding his head approvingly.

"Miss Lawton put 'em there. I don't like 'em, nuther. B'lieve I'll take 'em off. They might distrac' attention from the sermon, an' they stan' a chance of bein' knocked off if the preacher's strongly moved by the Sperit."

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"I like 'em," asserted Belcher. "I think they look fine. The Bible's full of sayin's 'bout flowers, 'lilies of the field ' an' 'roses of Sharon ' an'—here comes Dave, let's leave it to him. Look-a-here, Dave, I'm in favor an' Crocker's ag'in' havin' them dahlias on the pulpit. What do you think?"

Elder French came briskly down the aisle and studied the dahlias for a moment. He was young, well built, of medium height, smooth-shaven, with light hair and blue eyes.

"All the city churches have flowers on the pulpit. I say, keep them."

"That settles it," grunted Asa, "the majority rules. I might er known you 'd side with Belcher."

"Sorry to differ with you, Elder, but you asked my opinion and I gave the best I had," declared French, exchanging a smiling glance with Belcher.

Asa plied his duster and French arranged the chairs behind the pulpit, wiped the large Bible with his handkerchief, and moved the vase of dahlias out of the clergyman's reach.

The audience room of the Wesley Methodist Church was spacious, and could seat more than a hundred worshippers. The size of its congregation depended on the weather and the popularity of its preacher. From the two entrance doors ran aisles, making a double row of pews in the center and a single row on each side against the walls. At the rear, over the entrance hall, was the gallery with its organ and seats for the choir. On the raised platform in front was the oaken pulpit, rudely carved, and three chairs upholstered in red plush. The cushions in the pews had been originally of the same color, but changing conditions of sun and shade had produced many varied tints; some were

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badly frayed and others had been replaced with different fabrics.

The walls were painted gray and decorated with imitation pillars, on which the artist had produced wonderful shadow effects. One corner of the ceiling had been stained by water leaking through the roof, and there were places where the paint had fallen from the plaster. From the center of the ceiling hung the chandelier, a twisted horror of metal, like an inverted tree, the fruit of which was seven kerosene lamps. There were three tall windows on each side — decorated by squares of color in the corners — red, blue, and yellow. Back of the pulpit, high up on the wall, was a round window, the glory of the church. Here, in vivid tints, was the combination of a red cross, a golden crown, and a white dove on a field of heavenly blue. None of the congregation had seen the stained glass of York Minster or Rheims Cathedral, and the round window above the pulpit was to them the greatest wonder of Christian art.

The sound of heavy feet on the wooden steps now gave warning that the congregation was arriving, and Elder French went to the outer door, for his duty was to meet the worshipers and to assign seats to the occasional stranger. Elder Crocker laid the duster away, put on his coat, and closed the windows. Elder Belcher sat contentedly in his seat, until his wife, a little woman with beady black eyes, touched him on the shoulder. He rose slowly, stepped ponderously into the aisle, and seated himself again with a sigh, after two little Belchers had preceded him, Mollie, the youngest, being lifted to her place on the cushion.

Following close after was Miss Abby Green, whose pew was on the side halfway down, where she could get a good

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view of congregation, choir, and preacher. Maud, her niece, was tall and pale, with regular features and black hair which had been coaxed to curl with the aid of the kitchen poker. She smiled at French and mounted the gallery stairs, a roll of music in her gloved hand. She showed no sign of the perturbation which disturbed her breast at the thought of the "note on the top shelf" she was not sure of reaching. Close behind her came Miss Harris, the organist, and the other members of the choir — Miss Gould, the alto, short and plain; Ed Fay, the tenor, a slender youth with sandy hair well plastered on his brow; and James Bullock, basso, a heavy youth whose dark locks had apparently been untouched by comb and brush since they left the pillow. In spite of his best efforts, it was James's fate to have his voice always dwarfed and drowned by the richer and stronger tones of Elder Belcher.

Now Ira Harp, the blacksmith, began to toll the bell, and the church filled rapidly. Only an occasional man, however, entered with his family, for fathers and brothers "in Israel" liked to linger outside, the "horse-shed congregation" making a rule not to come in until the organ started, and not then if Pasco Tripp was telling a story. Where he got them no one knew, but Pasco could have taken the place of Scheherazade, nor would he have exhausted his list of salacious stories on the thousandth night.

Pasco was a character. Born in the village, he had run away to join a circus, returning with a knowledge of the wicked world outside possessed by none of his neighbors. He had more influence for evil in Wesley than either the Methodist or the Baptist minister for good. He kept the lively stable, and had his little group of followers, the

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bolder spirits of the village. He traded horses, almost always to his own advantage, and had the fastest trotter in the Adirondacks which won tidy sums for him at the county fairs. He rarely failed to attend church on a Sunday morning, where, seated close to the door, his staring blue eyes were strangely disconcerting to the preacher. This gave Pasco much amusement and pleasure.

Nearly all the regular worshippers were now in their seats. Mrs. Davis, from the sawmill village, whose husband was a cripple and never attended church, sat with Mrs. Harp, the blacksmith's wife, who had quarreled with her husband. Mrs. Lawton, a plump and pretty widow, sat near Miss Green, who glared and sniffed at her entrance. There was Jared Small down from the mountain with Mrs. Jared and five little Smalls, with their tow heads like a flight of steps. The last woman to enter was Miss Smith, the milliner, who tried to look unconscious of the many evidences of her artistic handiwork.

The bell tolled more and more slowly, then ceased altogether, and there came the first notes from the organ, Mr. Fay standing close to Miss Harris's shoulder, prepared to help with the pages of her music. Indeed, he was too ready, and in his nervousness turned the first page too soon, forcing Miss Harris to extemporize some very doubtful notes. These were deadened by the thud of heavy boots as the "horse-shed congregation" arrived, led by Pasco Tripp, who took his seat alone in the corner of a rear pew near the door. Pasco was tall and straight, smooth-shaven, red-cheeked, and with a cold blue eye. His face rarely changed its expression, he seldom smiled, and his glance had a habit of roving here and there with no movement of the head to follow. This gave his eyes the sinister expression of a vicious horse.

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Now Deacon Harding walked solemnly to his seat, and, after a few moments of tense expectancy, John Gray emerged from the little room in the corner and took his place in the large red plush chair behind the pulpit.

The notes of the organ died reluctantly, for the bad key stuck until Miss Harris lifted it, then followed silence, and the preacher rose, came forward, raised his hands and said, "Let us repeat together the prayer taught us by our Saviour." Reverent souls, like Deacon Harding, closed their eyes as they bowed their heads, but there were many in the congregation who were curious and stared with blinking eyes through their parted fingers.

There had been many preachers in the Wesley Methodist Church, but none like John Gray. He had a straight back unbent by toil. The hands he lifted to heaven were white and free from the signs of labor which his predecessors had acquired from their gardens. His head was well set, his features regular, his brow that of the student, His voice was low but vibrant, and with no touch of country twang.

As the congregation looked and listened, the first impression was surprise, not unmixed with doubt of what was strange and unexpected, the younger members finding some attraction in the novelty of a waistcoat and collar of clerical cut.

When the prayer came to an end, Elder Belcher's "Amen" sounding last and most sonorous, the preacher opened the hymn book and said, "Let us sing the thirty-fifth hymn —

'Oh, come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant.'"

The preacher did not sing, which was a disappointment

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to the congregation, and he fell several points in their valuation, for a Methodist minister should be able to lead in song. He more than reinstated himself, however, in the long prayer that followed, and to his "Amen" were added many a fervent "Bless the Lord" and "Praise His holy name" from his listeners.

The next hymn was "Joy to the world, the Lord is come," and gave an opportunity for all the members of the quartette to distinguish themselves, which was taken full advantage of by all but Fay, whose voice was weak and tremulous with excitement. There was a sigh of relief when the hymn was over and the preacher opened the big Bible and announced, "I will read for our instruction from the seventh chapter of Judges." The congregation listened to the story of Gideon, and how, led by him, the children of Israel were delivered out of the hands of the Midianites. The hymn that followed, "Come, thou fount of every blessing," was a favorite of the Wesley Church and the congregation sang it unitedly and fervently.

When John Gray rose to preach his first sermon, the room was very still and every eye was fixed upon him. As he turned the black cover of his manuscript, one of the side entrance doors opened slowly, and Jude Burt entered. He closed the door behind him silently, and, with his shoulders bent respectfully, tiptoed his way to a corner pew in the rear of the church. It was annoying to be interrupted, and the preacher's nerves were tense under the excitement of his first sermon; but it took only one glance from Jude to dispel any trace of resentment, and in Jude's smile there was a friendliness that went straight to the preacher's heart.

He turned to his congregation and began with —

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"You will find my text in the seventh chapter of Judges, a part of the seventh verse: 'By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you.'"

There was a moment of silence as he looked down on the upturned faces of his congregation, almost pathetic in their intentness. Besides the villagers there were the "mountain folks," some of whom had driven a dozen miles in their springless carts down the narrow roads which wound between the mossy boulders. To them the Sunday sermon was a message from the Lord of Sabaoth, and the church door the gate of heaven. There came to John Gray a sense of the great responsibility he had taken upon himself, and he began with a low voice, which soon gained strength and fervor:

"The Children of Israel were dwelling in the Promised Land, 'flowing with milk and honey,' — the country of their dreams and aspirations, — but they were no less in bondage than when forced to make bricks without straw in the land of Egypt. They had exchanged their old taskmasters for the Midianites, who now oppressed them and who had driven them to dwell in the caves of the mountains. The 'Chosen People' had accepted both the wives and the idols of the heathen, and just punishment had followed sin. In their distress, it is written, 'The Children of Israel cried unto the Lord.' God answered their cry and sent them a deliverer.

"In the little village of Ophrah, near Shechem, Gideon 'threshed wheat by the winepress,' and there came to him an angel with this message:

"Go in this thy might and thou shalt save Israel."

"Gideon replied, 'Wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is poor and I am the least in my father's house.'

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"By this answer we learn two things about Gideon: he was humble and he was a doubter. Like Thomas, he asked a sign, and only after God had made fire spring from the rock did he take up his mission. But from this moment until the day of his death he never wavered. He built an altar to the true God and threw down that of Baal, and when the Midianites and the Amalekites pitched their tents against his people, he blew a trumpet, and in answer to the sound the Israelites gathered about him. We can picture Gideon standing on some rugged peak, and can hear the clear notes echoing from the hills and sounding through the valleys. My brethren, every Christian minister is a trumpeter; there is no call so high and holy."

All this time the preacher had read his sermon, lifting his eyes occasionally to look over his congregation. In the beginning nearly every face had expressed only curiosity. This had changed gradually as he talked to different degrees of approval and sympathy. Deacon Harding's face was still stern, and Abby Green's countenance could never cease to be curious. On one face only was there no change: every time the preacher looked at Pasco Tripp, the "flame of the spirit" was almost quenched, and he found himself turning almost automatically to Jude, who fanned the fire back to life as with the breath of faith.

He now left his manuscript entirely, and said:

"For many years I have been content to study and to teach, salving my conscience with the thought that by so doing I was performing the task for which I was best fitted. As I stand before you this morning, I realize my shortcomings, and I glory in the fact that I have become at last one of God's trumpeters."

At this personal statement, the congregation rustled

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their appreciation, and there were many exclamations of "Bless the Lord" and "Glory to His Name."

The preacher went on to tell the old story which has inspired so many Hebrew songs and sermons: how, when Gideon had gathered his men, facing a multitude of enemies, God told him his little army was too large; and Gideon proclaimed, "Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart"; how, with his diminished force, the Lord said unto Gideon, "The people are yet too many"; how, when they came to the water to drink, the Lord said, "Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink"; how there were but three hundred men who were so eager that they would not kneel to drink; and how the Lord said unto Gideon, "By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you."

The preacher's description of the attack upon the heathen, with the breaking of the pitchers and the elevation of the lamps in the darkness, was dramatic, and the congregation exclaimed again and again in their fervor. He emphasized the weakness of numbers, the strength of unity, the power of entire consecration. He said the weakness of the Christian Church was its unsanctified, careless, and indifferent members. He painted a picture of the perfect church, "without spot or blemish." He declared it was his purpose to follow Gideon's example with the Methodist Church of Wesley, and that it should rid itself of its unworthy members. He ended by proclaiming himself again "God's trumpeter," who was prepared to lead the little army before him to a victory over sin.

When the preacher took his seat, he looked over an audience of friendly faces, only Pasco Tripp's stony

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glance remaining cynical. Deacon Harding and the Elders who passed the contribution boxes took up a remarkably good collection of coppers, with some silver, and here and there a bill. Even Maud's solo was successful, the "note on the top shelf" being reached without catastrophe.

It was a very satisfied congregation that sang, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow," and nearly every head was bowed with reverence as the preacher gave the benediction: "May God bless you and keep you; may He cause His face to shine upon you and give you peace."

CHAPTER IV

AFTER the excitement and strain of his first Sunday service, John Gray slept well and woke next morning with his mind in some confusion. Indeed, it took him a little while to realize that he was no longer professor of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. Gradually the events of the previous day came back to him. He pictured his congregation as he looked down on it from the pulpit, and could see the faces lighten up and become sympathetic as he preached to them. He remembered how he had shaken hands with nearly every one — an ordeal not wholly pleasant, for many evidently believed that their friendliness should be expressed by the vigor with which they gripped his palm. There were large hands and small, soft and hard, cold and warm, dry — and, worst of all, clammy hands. He remembered distinctly the sticky fingers of little Mollie Belcher, for they had clung to a piece of candy during the service, and the preacher removed the stain of molasses from his own hand when he reached home. Of names he had almost no recollection.

After the service there had been the Sabbath School, and he had given his first talk to the children. In the early evening he had met the members of the Epworth League, and then had come the service, at which he preached from the text, "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect."

The consideration of his work was interrupted by the vigorous ringing of a bell at the foot of the stairs. He rose, eager for his day's duties, performed his hasty ablutions and descended hurriedly, for there was an insistent note

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in the peal of the bell. When he entered the dining-room he heard Cæsar making a great commotion in the next room, and found him swearing volubly at a stray cat who had climbed to the window-sill over which his cage was hung. The cat was watching Cæsar with longing eyes, fascinated by his green feathers and plump body, but fled at the preacher's entrance. The breakfast was a good one, cooked and served by the hands of Linda Stone, maid of all work, whom he found already installed in the parsonage. Tall and thin and taciturn, she entered the dining-room and departed into the kitchen as silently as one of the genii in the "Arabian Nights," and the dishes were served with something of the same mystery.

Breakfast over, the preacher began to explore the parsonage, in which he was as interested as a child with its first doll's house. He had arrived late on the Saturday afternoon, and this was the first moment that his mind had been free from care. He climbed to the attic, which was almost empty, for Methodist ministers bring little with them and take all their possessions away. There were a few old garments and hats of ancient pattern, and from the rafters hung bundles of herbs and ears of "pop-corn." In one corner was a barrel of old sermons. These he studied with the interest of a brother craftsman, wondering why they had been left behind. After a slight examination of the dusty pages, however, he decided that they were more conducive to slumber than to thought, and the barrel was a proper resting-place for them.

On the second floor were three bedrooms. One of these was the large chamber in which he had slept, the other two were small, and all of them were cut by the slanting roof. There was nothing to interest him here, and he descended to the front room, which was parlor, library, and

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study in one. It had four windows, two in front looking north on to the elm-shaded street, and through the one facing east the bright sun was streaming cheerfully. Cæsar's cage was hung here where he could get the full benefit of the warm rays, and he cried out a cheerful "Bless the Lord" at Gray's entrance. There was a home-made seat under the west window and it was covered with chintz, the only really comfortable seat in the room. The paper was a warm gray, on which were pictured a repetition of Chinese pagodas with mandarins, trees, and little lakes. On the walls was a map of Palestine and Paul's journeys, a steel engraving of Pilgrim's Progress, showing Christian emerging from the City of Destruction and climbing upward until he reached the Celestial City. There was also Daniel Webster on his death-bed, scripture texts in worsted, and a college diploma. The last he had brought with him and placed on the wall on the Saturday evening. The floor was covered by a carpet of ancient pattern, large baskets of roses in circles of foliage. The fireplace was in the front of the room, between the windows, and in it were brass andirons and an iron crane. A tall clock on the mantel showed a naval encounter, in which an American frigate was evidently worsting a craft flying the Union Jack on its one remaining mast. The clock was flanked on both sides with candelabra. There were no draperies over the windows, which were protected by wooden shutters on hinges.

There was a bookcase, on whose shelves were a few volumes in somber bindings. Their titles were discouraging, and John Gray decided most of them should be relegated to the attic, to make room for his own books. Next to the door leading to the front porch was a piece of mahogany furniture for coats, hats, and umbrellas. The

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chairs and sofa were straight-backed and covered with black haircloth. Close to the east windows there was a flat table desk and behind it a swivel chair.

To this Gray went, and began to examine the drawers of the desk. They were entirely empty, with the exception of a large middle drawer, in which was a rough sketch which Gray examined with much interest. It was plainly a map of the village, which had been left by some former incumbent. There was the main street, the little houses and the names of their occupants, neatly printed. Here was the parsonage, and he saw that his neighbor to the east was Elder Belcher and to the west, Miss Hale. Beyond there was the French Place, as large as any three of the others, and then the Methodist Church — *his* church. The preacher noticed that his neighbors across the way were Elder Crocker and Miss Green. The preacher studied the chart carefully and placed it back in the drawer, grateful to his predecessor, who had been thoughtful enough to leave him this useful guide.

Having completed his examination of the house, for he did not dare invade Linda's quarters, he could no longer resist the smiling appeal of the sun. He put on his hat, went through the front door and down the wooden steps on to the gravel walk which led to the gate. He drew a long breath and drank in the rich odor of the pine trees which flanked the pathway. They were tall and dark, and he was glad to leave their somber shade and pass by a clump of lilac bushes at the corner of the house to the garden at the rear. To his left was a woodshed, running back from the kitchen, and through the open door he could see the piles of wood and the axe resting on the chopping-block. From the side of the woodshed to upright posts were stretched the clothes-lines, with the

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"washing" flapping in the breeze. It was a Monday morning to delight a washerwoman's heart, with its cloudless sky and drying wind.

On both sides of the garden was a high wooden fence, sadly in need of paint; and at the rear a rough stone wall. Beyond this, a strip of meadow ran down to a little river, shaded by weeping willow trees. In the garden were the late flowers, survivors of the summer's sun and the touches of the chill autumn. On one side a line of hollyhocks were putting on here and there a belated blossom; on the other, petunias sprawled along the fence in a careless border. There were bachelor's buttons, mignonette, sweet alyssum, and a second blooming of sweet Williams. There was a cluster of sunflowers in a corner by the wall, over which the wild cucumber spread its green sprays and feathery bloom; white clematis at the corner of the woodshed exhaled its sweetness. There were a few late rose-bushes, with here and there a blossom.

It was evident, however, that Gray's predecessor had devoted most of his attention to the growth of vegetables. There were gooseberry and currant bushes, rustling cornstalks, a few big golden pumpkins, too heavy to be taken away, and beans stacked around their poles to dry.

Gray examined every nook and corner, and even obtained a view of his neighbors' gardens through the cracks in the fences. He began to plan for the coming spring: there were no signs of strawberries, and these he resolved to have. He must write for catalogues; and, still planning, he seated himself on a weather-worn bench with only three legs, but which was made serviceable by leaning against the fence. A grapevine had been allowed to run riot from his neighbor's yard, and it had climbed to an old apple tree whose branches reached down to the

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fence, making a natural arbor. The mingling of green leaves, the tracery of the vine, the purple grapes and the red apples, against the background of blue sky, gave a gay riot of color.

He had forgotten his plans for the future in the enjoyment of the present, when there came to him the sound of a closing door and a clear voice singing,

*"Auprès de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, bon, bon.
Auprès de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon dormir."*

He was enough of a linguist to translate the song, and at the repetition of the verse he shook his head. He wondered to hear anything so light, so frivolous, and almost wicked in a sober little Adirondack village. The singer came nearer and nearer and paused directly behind Gray's back. There was a rattling of metal and wood and, looking up, he saw a ladder, supported by the fence, the top rounds resting against the branches of the tree. He did not know what to do, so sat silent and motionless, his back pressed against the fence, while the singer climbed the ladder. When he looked up he could see a willow basket, two shapely arms and busy fingers that plucked first the red apples and then covered them with the purple grapes. The face he could not see, for it was hidden by the basket. The hands were white, with flexible, dexterous fingers, neither the hands of a working-woman nor those of a "lady of leisure." The arms were bare to the elbow.

The Reverend John Gray had never noticed a woman's arms before. He knew in a general way that women had arms, but regarded them as necessary mechanical contrivances by which the hands could be served. Now for

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the first time he realized that they might be beautiful as well as useful, and he studied those above him wonderingly. There were the supple, slender wrists, white-corded and blue-veined, and the graceful lines by which they became the rounded arms. They were lovely, like the sky, the fruit, and the foliage. They were something more, but he did not realize the sensuous appeal of the warm flesh. He was beginning to be impressed, when the singer, having filled her basket, descended from the ladder, removed it from the tree, and there was the sound of footsteps and a closed door. She departed as she came, singing with a rich contralto voice:

*"Au près de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, bon, bon."*

The preacher was first disturbed and a little angry. What right had any one to take his apples and grapes? On second thought, he wondered if after all the grapes did not belong to her, for the roots were in her yard. He would waive this point, but he certainly could charge her with the theft of his apples. That she sang when she took them, as if she was unconscious of guilt, was no excuse for her. The fact, which he dimly recognized, that her arms and hands were beautiful, was neither excuse nor extenuation.

In spite of himself, there was something about the whole affair which fascinated him. Accustomed to act with caution and after consideration, the daring and the carelessness appealed to some dormant sense, and he found himself wishing that he could act like this with no questioning of conscience. Then, realizing that his thoughts were wandering in "by and forbidden paths," he put them from him guiltily. He was tempted to look

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through the cracks in the fence, but resisted, returned to the house, and spent the rest of the morning putting things in order.

It was the middle of the afternoon when, feeling the need of fresh air and exercise, he put on his black overcoat and started to explore the village. He walked briskly along, the elm leaves, which had begun to fall, rustling under his feet. He passed the French Place, the church, and descended the hill to the sawmill, which shrieked at him as he passed. Just beyond was the red wooden bridge. Its timbers were hewn, its superstructure heavy for the short span of the river. Its floor was of stout plank, fitted by a skillful joiner and worn by many hoofs and wheels. The grass grew along the sides of the stream, marsh grass and tall sedge, intermingled with the lavender spikes of the queen of the meadow. Gray was not imaginative, but he pictured to himself the springtime, with violets and cowslips, and lovers leaning their arms on the dark-red parapet. To this flight of fancy he was led by the sight of initials, heart-enclosed, and carved by many jack-knives in the wood. He wondered if the love affair of H. L. and M. G. had ever come to fruition. He found one carven date of 1776, and he questioned whether Peter Simmons took up arms for his country and if his descendants had qualified as Sons of the Revolution.

He lingered on the bridge for a long time, and, returning, climbed the hill on the opposite side of the street, passed the cluster of dingy sawmill tenements, and came to the little square of green grass in front of the Methodist Church. From this vantage-ground he could look down into the village, and could follow the little stream which, making a circle, cut the road again and was crossed by an ugly iron bridge. Facing the Methodist Church across

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the square was the village inn, the Mountain House, with its long piazza and its row of chairs for the use of its guests. Close to it was an ugly brown building, with an outdoor staircase climbing to its second floor. Over the front windows was painted in irregular letters, "The Daniel Webster Club." In the center of the square was the Soldiers' Monument, where a very stony-faced youth stood in an attitude of "attention," musket in hand. At the foot of the statue was a watering-trough, surrounded by a muddy pool. Even from the top of the hill the view was circumscribed, for the horizon was shut in by encircling hills, covered with dark pines. These were broken only by a little valley through which the river ran, disappearing in the west.

The preacher walked slowly down the hill, past the little houses on the left side of the road, and meeting no one until he came to Miss Green's cottage, where the blinds were lifted and he could see a pair of curious eyes peering between the slats. Just beyond was Elder Crocker's store, and Gray decided he would call upon this pillar of the church. On the window-sill was the "Maltee" cat, only a pane of glass separating him from "Billy Bryan," resting at ease on a roll of red flannel. The contrast was almost pathetic, and the gaunt cat appealed to the preacher's sympathy as it fled at his approach. Gray climbed the high steps and was about to enter, but hesitated at the sounds of altercation which came from inside.

"Look-a-here, Bateese, you left the merlasses runnin', it's all over the floor, and you've got it to pay for. Ain't yer got no sense, anyhow?"

"Misser Crocker, I nevair did do it," came a voice in remonstrance.

"Darn it all!" exclaimed the Elder. "It's bad enough

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without you tryin' to lie outer it. Did n't you fill that jug for Mis' Lawton?"

"Sure I did," answered the voice, with a touch of the French patois, "and you for Deacon Harding after me. I don't 'low nobody to call me liar. I go right away, pretty quick."

At this there was silence, and the Elder said, "P'r'aps you're right, Bateese, but yer need n't get het up 'bout it an' throw up a good job like this."

"Then you say you sorry you call me a liar."

"I did n't call you a liar," remonstrated the Elder. "All I said was, 'Don't lie outer it.'"

"Is it not the same?" inquired Bateese. "I don't care — if you say you sorry."

"I s'pose I did make a mistake," admitted the Elder grudgingly. "Everybody makes 'em sometimes."

Calm apparently having succeeded storm, Gray entered, and was met by a little chap with bright black eyes and a mop of curling hair. He wore a blue apron, a shirt with broad red stripes, purple elastics on his sleeves, and basket-work cuffs. At the preacher's entrance, he came forward smiling cheerfully, and said:

"*Bonjour, Monsieur*, what do you wish?"

Elder Crocker was on his knees scooping the molasses off the dirty floor into a big tin measure, with a secret determination to pour the fluid back into the barrel. He rose hastily and guiltily, elbowed the little chap to one side, extended a bony hand and said:

"Good-afternoon, Pastor, glad to see yer. Come right into the office."

Gray followed into the inner room and was given a seat in the corner, place being made for him by the removal of some samples of breakfast food.

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"'T was a mighty good sermon you gave us yesterday," declared the Elder, climbing on to the high stool, "and 'twas the best collection we've had for ten year. You did n't make no mistake nuther in settin' a high standard for the church."

John Gray acknowledged the appreciation of the Elder, who continued, "I'm glad you came to see me so early, too, for I want a good talk with you. It's mighty easy for a new minister to make mistakes the fust few days which he can't get over for a long time. O' course, I know every one in the village, an' keepin' store gives me a chance to find out pretty well all about 'em."

"I shall always be pleased to receive the advice of any member of my church," declared Gray, "after which, of course, you understand, I must act as I think best."

The Elder was too much impressed with his own wisdom to note the mental reservation, and said: "You must n't forget callin' on everybody and yer oughter call in the right order, givin' preference to the oldest an' most important members. Fust of all, you oughter call on Mrs. French. She gives a hundred dollars every year in support of the church. John French, her husband, what died a year ago, was an Elder, an' her son Dave was made an Elder in his place. You'll kill two birds with one shot by callin' on her, and I'll make out a list for yer to follow after. She's an awful sick woman, an' 'bout ten minutes will be as long as yer oughter stop. Call on her after supper to-night, an' afore the meetin' of the Board."

"I will make the call to-night as you advise," replied Gray, "but it must not interfere with the Board meeting, which I consider of the greatest importance. We must deal severely with the backsliders of this church."

"I'm glad you feel like you do 'bout outbreakin' sin-

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ners," declared Crocker. "Belcher an' Dave is too easy. The Deacon an' me feel the same as you, an' if we work together, we kin have our own way."

"I'm glad you agree with me, Brother Crocker," said the preacher, rising at the sound of the village clock striking six, and mindful of Linda's rather peremptory admonition that "if yer want a good supper, yer must git home prompt on six o'clock."

Although only a few minutes late, the preacher was made conscious of his fault by Linda's expression, but he did full justice to his supper, after which he left the house, and, walking up the long path from the street, rang Mrs. French's doorbell. He was admitted by a neatly dressed maid, and taken into a large room at the right of the hall, where he found Mrs. French reclining in an invalid's chair by the window. She was tall and pale, very emaciated, her face lined by years of suffering. Strangely enough, however, her hair had not a single thread of white in it and her eyes were bright. Her voice was low and musical, as she said:

"It is good of you to call so soon upon me. I'm sorry I cannot rise to greet you. Take this chair by the window. It is a beautiful sunset and the afterglow is wonderful."

At the beginning Gray found himself rather at a loss for words. It was his first parochial call, and almost the first call of any kind he had ever made. Long afterward he remembered the picture Mrs. French made, the fading light from the west shining on her face. She was clad in a dove-colored wrapper, which fell in loose folds around her wasted figure. It was relieved at the throat by a collar of lace, ivoried by long use. Her hands were long and white, and when she talked they moved expressively in illustration of her speech. Her face had the marmoreal pallor of

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flesh that had been purged of color by pain, but this lack was compensated by the inner light of her spirit. She quickly put her visitor at his ease, questioning him about his work and training, and then spoke of her son, David, with the greatest pride and affection. She told how he had given up his college course to stay with her, and how pleased she was that he had been made an elder in his father's place. On a table by her side was a vase of white roses, and in a wicker basket on her lap were the materials of her occupation, the mimicry of these blossoms in wax. Her success was remarkable, but when the preacher expressed his admiration, she spoke apologetically, explaining that it helped her to pass the long hours of pain. From this the conversation wandered far afield, and Gray told of the collection of flowers and plants which he had made, including everything that grew in the country near the college where he had lived.

"I hardly think that you will find anything new here, although the fields are full of flowers. Most of all I love the arbutus, which flourishes wonderfully under the oak leaves near the river," said Mrs. French.

"I promise to bring you the first arbutus blossom that shows its head next April," declared Gray, rising to take his departure, for he could see the church clock from the window.

Mrs. French was silent for a moment, and then said, smilingly:

"I thank you for your thoughtfulness, dear Pastor, but they must be the flowers of memory only."

"The flowers of memory?" inquired Gray wonderingly.

"Yes, and I have suffered so long that death will not be an unwelcome guest. They tell me I've only a few more weeks to live. On the whole, I shall be glad to go."

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She spoke as calmly as if it were an earthly journey, and Gray was greatly shocked and moved. He could not speak, but his face showed his sympathy.

"This must not sadden you," she said, "and perhaps I should not have spoken, but I wanted you to understand, for I need your help. Come and see me often, and pray with me. My only sorrow is leaving David. There is something on his mind, something which is troubling him, that he will not tell me. Perhaps he will talk with you, and you can help him."

"I will surely do all I can," declared Gray earnestly.

It was the first time that he had come close to hopeless illness, or met one face to face with death. He could give no consolation in words, except to quote a comforting passage of Scripture, but it was really Mrs. French who helped him to bear the shock of the announcement. She was the consoler, not he, and as he took the white hand in departing, it was his own that trembled.

CHAPTER V

ELDER BELCHER was seated in an armchair at the left of the fireplace in the preacher's study. He filled it to overflowing and it creaked whenever he moved. Elder French was walking up and down the room, his hands clasped behind his back. So preoccupied was he that he did not notice that Belcher was watching him with an expression of growing curiosity on his face. He did not stop when Belcher cleared his throat and said:

"What makes you so uneasy, David? The preacher'll have to buy a new carpet if you don't set down an' rest a spell."

When at last French paused in front of the fireplace, he looked a full minute into the flames before he spoke, — "It's an awful thing . . . to turn any one out of the church."

"You're right, Dave," replied Belcher, "expellin' backsliders ain't no joyful occupation; yet sometimes it has to be done; the Board has to do it."

"It's like excommunication," declared French. "I want no part in it."

"You're an elder," said Belcher, "secretary of the Board an' thinkin' of studyin' fer the ministry. You'll get used to it; it's harder on the Deacon, with Faith, his own daughter, comin' before us. How many are there?"

"Fred Miller, Abby Green, Jude Burt, and . . . Faith."

"M'm," said Belcher, "Fred for worldliness, Abby for slander, Jude for drunkenness, and Faith for —"

"Don't!" exclaimed French, almost threateningly.

Belcher continued calmly: "Abby has always back-

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bitten her neighbors, an' by continued use sorter 'stablished a right o' way over their repertations. Fred Miller's religion's been softened an' his heart hardened by three years in the legislater. Jude has my sympathies, an' Faith—"

Belcher did not finish, but shook his head solemnly.

"There's yòu and me for her," exclaimed French, "and her own father—he can't be against her."

"I'm not so sure," declared Belcher; "the Deacon's terrible bitter."

At this moment the bell over the front door began to swing and tinkle. Linda entered, wiping her hands on her apron, opened the outside door and Deacon Harding entered.

"'Evenin', Deacon," said Linda. But he did not reply to her, nor to the greetings of French and Belcher. He hung his hat and coat on the hat-tree by the door, went to the vacant seat by the fire, and sat silently watching the flames. A moment later the bell rang again, and Linda admitted Elder Crocker, who came bustling in, his entrance changing the atmosphere of the room at once. He deposited his coat and hat by the side of Deacon Harding's, and shook hands with French and Belcher. The Deacon did not notice his outstretched palm, and Crocker threw a log on to the fire and warmed his bony fingers.

"Fine weather, Asa," rumbled Belcher. "How yer feelin'?"

"Not very smart, 'Lige," replied Asa. "My dyspepsy's awful bad. It's my 'thorn in the flesh,' like the 'postle Paul tells about."

At this Harding looked up. "Don't use Scriptor to fit your dyspepsy, Asa."

Crocker turned aggressively and said, "The Bible don't

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tell us just what Paul suffered from, Deacon. If you had pains in your insides like mine, you'd think you'd swallowed a bushel o' thorns."

"What do you take for it, Asa?" asked Belcher.

"I've got most o' them patent medicines wore out," replied Asa. "Seems like after you use 'em a while they don't do no good. Paduca's Panacea uster help me a lot, but I've been dependin' on Jamaica ginger o' late. It's warmin'. I don't know what I'd do without it."

At this moment there came a sound of the meeting-house clock striking seven.

"The preacher's late," declared Crocker.

"Not much, yet," replied Belcher, taking out his watch with difficulty, "if the meetin'-house clock's right. Ten minutes, if the one on the shelf's kerrect."

"It's five minutes past by my watch," said Crocker, "an' it don't vary three minutes in a year."

"M'm," laughed Belcher, "the day starts by it, an' if it stopped, the sun would stan' still just as it did for Joshua an' the Israelites. I wonder what really happened then, Deacon; did the earth stop turnin' round?"

At this question Harding looked up reproachfully and asked,

"Ain't doubtin' Scriptor, are ye, brother? We must take every word of the Bible on faith."

"Nothin' sacred 'bout Asa's watch, is there?" inquired Belcher. "We've been goin' by guesswork ever since the meetin'-house clock went wrong. Why don't you fix it, Asa? It's your job. You're the sexton."

At this challenge Crocker replied: "I've took the blame thing apart twice; I've iled the works an' shoved the reg-later over far's she'll go, an' now she loses ten minutes on me every day. It's forty-four steps up to the steeple

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an' I can't climb it more'n twice a week to set the hands ahead."

"Ever tried kerosene on her?" inquired Belcher.

"Tried everythin'," was the reply. "She's 'bout wore out, I figger. Afore the railroad come to the Junction it did n't much matter. Now the whole town's upset. Jude Burt, too, he runs his stage by railroad time, an' folks git left if they trust the clock."

"Jude says she did better when she was stuck fast," declared Belcher. "Then she was right twice in the twenty-four hours, anyhow. Now she's lyin' all the time, an' what can you expect o' members o' the church?"

This was too much for Crocker's temper, and he exclaimed angrily: "Jude better keep still. He's too free with that tongue of his'n."

Belcher continued calmly, evidently amused at Crocker's excitement: "I'd help yer, Asa, only I ain't built fer stair-climbin'. I might git stuck comin' down. The stairs are narrer fer my figger."

"Jude's got no business to talk, and he a backslider," declared Harding.

"Every Saturday night," said Belcher, "after eight, Jude ain't in no fit condition to tell whether the clock's goin' or comin' — and he don't much care."

At this Harding half rose from his seat and declared: "Jude's not fit to be a church member. If we can't clear the church of such backsliders, how can we expect the showers of blessings promised in the Bible?"

French had resumed his silent pacing of the floor, keeping his eyes on the door. He now stopped in front of Harding, and said: "It's all right to be down on sin, but we must n't be too hard on the sinner. 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels,' the Good Book says."

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"You're right, Dave," exclaimed Belcher. "That's Jude's favorite text. We're all earthen vessels; the best of us make mistakes. That's the reason they put rubbers on lead pencils. The trouble is, some mistakes don't rub out. Seems if they're wrote with indelible ink. Speakin' of free talkin', Abby Green comes afore us ag'in to-night. Her tongue'll distance Jude's every heat they trot, an' she ain't good-meanin' like Jude, nuther."

"An' yet," declared Crocker, "when Abby 'gits the power,' she can shake up the tremblin' sinner better'n any revivalist that's ever set foot in Wesley."

Belcher was too good-natured to quarrel, but obtained an unholy joy in aggravating Crocker. He particularly disliked Abby Green, who was forever saying spiteful things and was the cause of much trouble in the village.

"Did you ever notice, Asa," inquired he, "how powerful like Dave's p'inter dog Abby looks, with her sharp nose scenting scandal instead of game an' one paw up like this?"

He rose with difficulty from his seat and imitated a "p'inter dog" — rather unsuccessfully because of his huge bulk and round face. "Her eyes are peekin' through them blinds o' hers most o' the time. We don't need no newspapers here in Wesley while Abby's on the job. If she can't see nuthin', she invents news like the city editors — spicy news, too."

Crocker was about to reply in the defense of Abby when Harding spoke.

"It's more'n gossip we've got to handle to-night."

"Yes," declared French. "It's a dreadful thing to put a person out of the church, no matter what they've done."

After this there was silence for a little while, broken by Crocker with "Fred Miller's in town."

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"I s'pose we'll see him in a few minutes," declared Belcher. "Strange he ain't married Alice. I remember his givin' her the first diamond ring ever brought to Wesley."

"I wish the preacher'd come," protested Crocker. "I hope he's goin' to turn out all right, but I never expected to see a man in the Wesley Methodist Church pulpit with his collar wrong side afore an' his vest buttoned down the back like a woman's waist."

"Clothes don't matter," replied Belcher. "What do ye suppose Saint Paul wore when he was preachin'? I liked both his sermons. They make yer think. He's got some brains inside that good-lookin' head o' his. They say they kep' him in college after he graduated to teach Greek, because he was so good at it."

"He's a good preacher," agreed Harding, "but he knows more about Greek than of the sin and suffering in the world."

"He'll learn enough about sin right here in Wesley," declared French.

"Well," drawled Asa, "I s'pose we could n't git a better man fer six hundred dollars a year. Camp-meetin' preachers an' first-class evangelists ask more. They said at quarterly conference that he has money and need n't work unless he wants to; that he's a pet o' the Bishop's an' can go anywhere he's a notion to. I'd ruther had 'n older 'n' a married man."

"One with more experience of the world and its wickedness," added Harding.

"Experience of this kind will come to him fast enough right where he is," said French, with his eyes fixed on the fire.

There was silence for a few moments, which was broken

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by the sound of hurried footsteps on the gravel walk.

"Here's the preacher now," exclaimed Belcher.

They all rose to their feet as Gray entered hurriedly, hung his hat and coat on the hat-tree, and greeted them with "Good-evening, brothers. The Lord be with you." He shook hands with them all, beginning with the Deacon and ending with French. He took his seat in the chair behind the desk, and the others drew their chairs in a half-circle in front of him.

"I was paying a pastoral call on Elder French's mother," he said. "It's wonderful how brave she is in spite of her suffering."

"Yes," replied French. "Mother never complains, though she grows weaker all the time, and the doctor says the least shock would prove fatal."

"We must pray for her," declared Gray. "I am sorry to be late, but I watched the church clock from her window and did not realize it was slow."

At this Belcher smiled, and Crocker answered resentfully:

"I've done my best to fix it, Pastor. I can't git it to keep good time."

Gray replied: "The church clock should be right. It must tell the truth." He opened the Bible on his desk, turned the leaves until he found a piece of note-paper, then rose to his feet and said: "Brothers, we have serious business before us to-night, which concerns the church and the whole community. Let us spend a few minutes in silent prayer for God's guidance."

The preacher bowed his head and the others rose, turned, and knelt, with their faces to their chairs. There was a long silence until Gray lifted his face heavenward and prayed:

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"May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer."

This was followed by "Amen" from French and Crocker, "Bless the Lord" from Harding, Belcher concluding with "Praise His holy name."

The Deacon and elders rose awkwardly and resumed their seats, and Gray continued,

"Yesterday, brethren, I brought to your mind how Gideon left the faint-hearted and sluggish behind him. We are gathered together to-night to consider the question of the faint-hearted, the sluggish, and the sinning backsliders of this church. We have summoned these wandering ones to appear before us, to say what reason exists why they shall not be dropped from the roll of membership." He continued, reading from a paper in his hand: "The names of these backsliders are Frederick Miller, Abigail Green, Jude I. Burt, and Faith Harding. Let us purify our hearts with serious thought as we await their coming."

They sat with their eyes on the floor until the bell rang, and Linda entered and opened the outside door to Frederick Miller. He greeted all cheerfully and took his seat in a chair which he placed between Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker. Dark, clean-shaven, and confident, with a touch of condescension in his voice and manner, Miller was extremely well dressed, in striking contrast with the others. Nobody introducing him, he said, "Good-evening," to the preacher, with a trace of challenge in his voice. Gray acknowledged the greeting, but did not smile, for he was not pleased with the careless attitude of this backslider. He read from the paper before him:

"Frederick Miller, you are charged with — first, the

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continued neglect of your duties as a member of this church; second, the willful breaking of the Lord's Day; third, worldliness inconsistent with your profession, as shown by — dancing, the playing of cards, and theater-going. What have you to say to these charges?"

Miller replied promptly, apparently not at all perturbed by the direct charges:

"Well, I admit I've danced, I've played cards, and I've attended the theater."

"How 'bout the Sabbath?" inquired Crocker.

"I confess that I have not performed any duties of the church except by an occasional attendance and a check for its expenses."

When he finished, he crossed one leg over the other, revealing a close-fitting, well-polished shoe, which was a reflection on every one in the room.

Gray met the challenge in Miller's eyes with a level glance, stern and accusing. "You admit your backsliding. Have you any excuse to offer?"

"Hardly excuses," answered Miller. "My sins are those of the average man, living a decent life, who wants to enjoy some of the good things of the world."

"You joined this church and took upon yourself the obligation of a Christian. How did you keep your vows? How did you live?"

"I enjoyed pleasures I had been forbidden," answered Miller.

"Were you guilty of outbreaking sin?" asked the preacher. And then, almost like a thrust, came, "The sins of the flesh?"

"Yes, the sins of the flesh," replied Miller defiantly.

After this there was silence, and Crocker was the first to speak.

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"How 'bout the dancin'? Do you dance round dances? Do you hold the girl in yer arms?"

"Yes, of course," replied Miller.

"I s'pose she has bare neck an' — shoulders?"

"Sometimes," answered Miller, the corners of his mouth twitching.

"Well, tell me," inquired Crocker aggressively, "do you feel particerlarly religious when you're dancin' with a girl — held tight — like that?"

At this Miller smiled broadly and was about to answer, but Gray interposed. "Brother Crocker, that is enough." He turned to Miller and asked, "Have you played cards?"

"Yes," replied Miller.

"Do you think it right to take money in that way?" continued Gray.

"Take money'!" exclaimed Miller. "Not guilty! They play too good a brand of poker at Albany. They take mine."

"How 'bout the theater?" inquired Belcher, who felt that it was his turn to take part in the meeting.

"I go to the theater," answered Miller. "I suppose you and even the Deacon have seen 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"

"I have never darkened a theater door," declared Harding. "I did not go to the oratorio of 'Esther' here in the village last winter."

"Well, Deacon," said Miller, "you're consistent, anyway, and 'Consistency's a jewel.'" Then he turned suddenly to Gray with, "What about you?"

At this challenge the preacher's face flushed, but he answered promptly, "I saw 'Joseph and his Brethren' in New York."

"What did you think of it?" continued Miller.

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"The first acts were very beautiful, the tents of Shechem and the wells of Dothan were vivid pictures never to be forgotten. I did not approve of the scene between Joseph and Potiphar's wife nor her costume — and I left the theater in the middle of the act."

"You left the theater?" asked Miller. "The actions were like the Bible and the costumes authentic, were they not?"

"Possibly," replied Gray. And then, resenting the cross-examination, he asked, "Would you approve the Garden of Eden, with — authentic costumes?"

"No," replied Miller, smiling again, "not before the fall, and they've not gone quite as far as that on Broadway — yet."

"Were there Bible stories or pictures in the last play you saw?" asked Gray.

"Let me think," replied Miller. "No, it was a musical comedy. I admit I have been to plays with scanty costumes and — stayed. You have me there."

"Yes," declared Gray grimly, "I have you there. How did you spend yesterday?"

"I played golf at the Country Club."

"You knocked a little ball over the fields when you might have worshiped God in his tabernacle."

"I certainly did not hear you preach. I think golf in the open air was better for me."

"Neither my sermons nor myself are on trial to-night. You admit all the charges brought against you?"

"I do, but I see no reason why I should be treated like a criminal. I have harmed no one, and my conscience does not trouble me."

"You are a sinner," declared Gray, "before the bar of God and this church. Brethren of the Official Board, full

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confession has been made. Brother Miller, will you publicly acknowledge your sins at the close of the service next Sunday and express your determination for amendment?"

Up to this moment Miller had kept himself well under control. He now rose to his feet, a growing anger in his voice. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gray; I've had a foolish fondness for this church where my fathers worshiped. I hoped to come to terms with you. We are too far apart. I have moved, but you have not."

"The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets," quoted Deacon Harding. "It does not move nor change."

"Yes, Deacon; the Wesley Methodist Church does not, but you forget there are others. There are twenty different brands of Methodists, besides a hundred other creeds. Which is right? There you sit with your hard faces and harder doctrines, like the clock in your steeple, — slow, behind the times. I don't belong with you."

"I do not think you do," interrupted Gray sternly.

"You have n't got beyond the first chapter of Genesis," declared Miller. "I have. You're acting according to your lights, and we can't agree. Good-night, and good-bye."

As he turned the knob of the door, he smiled mockingly at the little group, and took his departure.

"A rich man shall hardly enter the kingdom of heaven," said the preacher, as the footsteps died away.

"We'll miss his check," declared Crocker. "Only David's mother gave us more."

"He's not a bad man," asserted French.

"Perhaps not," interrupted Belcher, "but he says himself he don't belong with us, 'n' that settles it."

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Deacon Harding cleared his throat and in a sing-song voice said,

““The old-time religion, the old-time religion,
The old-time religion is good enough for me,””

and Elder Crocker continued with,

““’T was good enough for father, ’t was good enough for mother,
’T was good enough for sister, ’t is good enough for me.’”

The preacher rose to his feet and said: “The question is this: shall the name of Frederick Miller be dropped from the roll of membership of the Wesley Methodist Church? You will vote with the consciousness that God’s eyes are upon you.”

He resumed his seat, and French passed small slips of paper to the others and kept one himself, handing each a pencil. They all wrote in silence, and French collected the ballots in a wooden contribution box with a long handle. He removed the ballots one by one, unfolded them, and then announced:

“There are three votes for and one against Frederick Miller’s expulsion from this church.”

He sat down; the preacher rose and declared solemnly:

“Brother French, as secretary of the Board, you are directed to cross off the name of Frederick Miller from the roll of the Wesley Methodist Church.”

“And yet,” said French, “it seems an awful thing to do. Can I open the door, Pastor? It’s dreadful hot.”

Gray assented and French went to the outside door and flung it open.

“It’s easy to see who voted to keep this backslider in the church,” remarked Crocker.

French turned at this challenge and replied calmly, “If there is any doubt about it, I will say it was my vote.”

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"But why, David?" inquired Belcher. "Your father, whose place you took, would have voted to expel this man. He asked for it himself. What else could we do?"

"I could n't condemn him," replied French. "You should n't have made me an elder."

"We'd be sorry to lose yer, David," said Crocker sneeringly, "but if ye can't do yer duty as an elder, ye'd orter quit."

"I wish I could," answered French; and then, turning to Gray, he said: "You see, Pastor, I've been in a cleft stick all the time. When Father died a year ago, I came back to Wesley. I was only half through college and hated to leave. They'd already made me elder, and Mother was so proud of it I had n't the heart to disappoint her. I've tried to live up to the office, too, but — failed. Mother is so weak and ill the least shock would kill her. I'm trying to keep her last days quiet and free from trouble. When the Lord takes her — then — I'll act."

At this Gray shook his head reprovingly, and said: "We must guard against a morbid conscientiousness. None of us is without sin, but that must not stand in the way of our duty. Gideon would not have taken Frederick Miller with him."

He could not understand what was troubling David French. His nervousness, his self-depreciation, his tolerance of spiritual weakness and sin, his inclination to resign his office, what did they mean? There was something appealing in the evident unhappiness of the young elder and the preacher was strongly drawn to him. Had he not made the promise to Mrs. French, he would have sympathized with one so evidently in spiritual conflict.

CHAPTER VI

THE bell over the door swung to and fro, but did not ring. The visitor gave it a stronger pull, and in answer to its call Linda appeared and ushered in Miss Abigail Green. She was tall and thin and stooping. She wore spectacles, and was dressed in a gown of faded brown and a black bonnet.

"I'm so het up, Linda," she declared, "I clean forgot to bring back them dozen eggs I borried."

She had a peculiar way of protruding her thin face and sniffing. This, with the habit of holding a hand in front of her, gave her the appearance of a dog who had just flushed a partridge.

"As 't was near a month ago, Abby," replied Linda, "don't bring 'em back." She pointed to the vacant seat, which Abby took with a final sniff, and the preacher, reading from his memoranda, declared:

"Miss Green, you have already admitted that you made false statements reflecting on the character of Sister Lawton."

"Yes," protested Abby, "but I did n't mean no harm."

Gray continued: "You told several persons that you saw Sister Lawton standing on her back porch, kissed and embraced by a strange man; that he entered the house, and — remained all night."

"Well, how was I to know 't was her own brother, back from Californy?" pleaded Abby.

"Just by asking her," interposed Belcher.

"He did n't stay, nuther," observed Crocker. "Jude

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drove him over to the Junction an' he caught the midnight."

This was such a direct hit that Abby was plainly confused, and all she could do was to protest, "I 'pologized to Mis' Lawton, did n't I? I said I was sorry; what more can I do?"

"You must make public confession in the church next Sunday," declared Gray sternly, for the pettiness and meanness of the woman was repulsive to one so conscientious and honest.

At this Miss Green fell back upon a woman's best defense, and began to cry. "You're dreadful hard on me, Pastor. It'll 'most kill me to stan' up afore 'em all."

"It may teach you to 'keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile,'" said Gray, rising, and Miss Green, taking the hint, also rose, her handkerchief to her eyes. When she reached the door, she turned and said:

"I know somethin' 'bout Elder Belcher, I hain't told to no one. I s'pose 't ain't no slander if it's true."

Having given this parting shot, she shut the door after her.

"Wonder what it is," exclaimed Belcher, smiling broadly. "I move Miss Green be asked to attend the next meeting 'n' tell."

"It is not necessary," declared Gray, frowning, "and we must remember the serious task before us to-night. The next name is that of Jude I. Burt. It is alleged that he is guilty of habitual drunkenness, also that last month he made a violent assault on Thomas Lunn, was arrested and fined. It does not seem possible. He was very cordial and kind to me when he drove me over from the Junction."

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"Jude orter been put out er the church ten year ago," declared Crocker vindictively.

"I'm not so sure of that," observed Belcher. "Jude 'n' I went to school together. There ain't a crooked bone in his body. Drink's his only fault."

"He comes of bad blood," remarked Harding, looking up from the fire. "His grandfather was a drunkard and his father a sot and infidel as well."

"Jude has n't had a fair chance," argued Belcher, turning to Gray. We call him just 'Jude,' but his father had him christened 'Judas Iscariot' to show his contempt for the church and religion."

"'Judas Iscariot'!" exclaimed Gray. "He was given that awful name?"

"That's his name," declared Belcher, "but we dropped the 'Judas' long ago. Jude did n't like it. I've always had a warm place in my heart for him. When I was a little chap at school, Jude kep' Asa here from knockin' me 'bout. I don't think Asa ever quite forgot the thrashin' Jude gave him."

At this direct attack, Crocker's nose took on a darker flush, as he replied:

"There was consider'ble difference of opinion as to who got the best o' that fight, but it ain't no school quarrel we've got to settle to-night. Every Saturday evenin' for years Jude has driven the stage into the stable, fed an' bedded down his team, an' then gone to the Webster Club an' got beastly drunk. Usually he's staggered home to bed, but one Sunday mornin' last spring the whole congeragation passed Jude lyin' drunk in the gutter."

"He nearly killed Tom Lunn," interposed Harding.

"'T would n't have been much loss if he had," said Belcher. "I s'pose nothin' but Tom's thick skull saved

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Jude from murder. He's strong as a bull, an' he hits like the kick of the hind leg of a mule."

French now spoke after his long silence.

"Mr. Gray, 't was the first time Jude ever showed signs of an ugly temper. He's good to every one. When Bateese came into the village from the lumber camp, sick with the smallpox, it was Jude who nursed the little Frenchman till he was well."

"Being good-natured's not enough for church membership," declared Harding. "I say he should be expelled."

"An' me, too," agreed Crocker. "He's no Bible Christian, an' the church 'll be better without him."

It was just as French was finishing his defense that Jude appeared at the open door, and he waited a moment while Harding and Crocker condemned him. He entered, however, with a genial smile on his face, as if he had heard nothing at all, hung his coat and hat on the hat-tree by the door, and, discovering a bottle protruding from Crocker's coat pocket, he quietly removed it and put it in his own, smiling more broadly than ever.

He greeted the little group of serious men heartily, without a shade of fear or suspicion in the tones of his voice. "Fine evenin', Pastor. 'Evenin', Deacon," he said, taking Harding's reluctant hand. "How are you, 'Lige?" giving the latter a hearty shake. "Well, David, my boy, you're young to be 'sociatin' with saints and graybeards." He turned to Crocker last, but not least cordially, and said, "An' if here ain't my old friend Asa. You're lookin' fine. Dyspepsy must be better. I'm mighty glad o' that."

He beamed on them all, and his smile did not disappear when the preacher declared, "You are very late."

"Am I?" inquired Jude. "That's too bad. The mare

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balked at the long hill." He turned to Crocker and continued, "You know, Elder, she took to balkin' after you parted with her."

"Yes," replied Crocker stiffly, "an' the gray horse you traded for her went lame on me — after you parted with her. Strange, was n't it?"

"Yes," said Jude, pursing up his lips, and philosophizing, "'t is strange how often a perfectly sound hoss goes wrong jest after she changes hands in a trade. I try to be honest, an' I know Brother Crocker can't help bein', whether he tries or not. Yet we was both mistaken, spite of all."

"The brown mare and the gray hoss ain't the question to-night, but *you*, Jude Burt," declared Harding.

"Yes, I know, Deacon," urged Jude, "but the mare made me late. I jest this minute arrived at the stable. Hain't had time to wash up or get a bite o' victuals, an' I came in without ringin'. I saw Linda through the kitchen winder with her hands in the dough dish, an' did n't want to trouble her."

Jude would have continued, but the preacher interposed again with: "You are very late. We might have voted for your expulsion from the church, your absence telling strongly against you."

"Why, I am late by that clock," exclaimed Jude, "but when I passed the meetin'-house it wa'n't quite half-past."

"You knew the clock could not be trusted," insisted Gray, "and the clock is not the question. You, Judas Burt, are accused of drunkenness and of violent assault which led to your arrest and conviction. What have you to say?"

At this challenge the smile left Jude's face, and he spoke

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earnestly and with a certain dignity. "First, Pastor, that I was christened 'Judas Iscariot Burt.' I'm glad you dropped the second name, but I've asked my friends to call me just 'Jude I.' The legislater ain't acted, but I consider 'Jude I.' 's my name. Next, I struck Tom Lunn for somethin' he said 'gainst Faith Harding — a good girl in spite of all. Her father was n't there an' I took his place." He said this looking directly into the Deacon's stern face. "My hands are man's size an' I s'pose I did n't know how hard I hit."

"You admit you were arrested, convicted, and fined?" asked Gray.

"'T ain't much use to deny what everybody knows," answered Jude. "News like that travels through this burg faster'n a trottin' horse. Besides, lyin's not one of my faults."

"What answer do you make to the charge of drunkenness?" inquired Gray.

At this Jude paused for a moment, and then replied, very slowly and distinctly, "I have been drunk every Saturday night for ten year."

"Why?" demanded Gray.

And Jude answered readily: "The Bible says, 'Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish. Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his misery no more.'"

At this very unusual quotation from the Scripture every member of the Official Board was startled, and a smile spread over Belcher's red face. The preacher hesitated for a moment, and then inquired:

"How does this apply to you?"

"I'll tell you," replied Jude. "After six round trips of thirty mile a day, in heat an' dust, in frost an' rain, a man

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needs to forget. He wants a little fun. It's blamed hard work to handle leather over teams half weak an' willin', an' half strong an' lazy."

"Have you any real excuse for your drunkenness?" the preacher asked.

"The taste for liquor is in my blood," replied Jude.

"A member of the Methodist Church must not be a slave to his appetite," asserted Gray.

"I s'pose you're right, Pastor," answered Jude, "but most men have their weakness. Look at 'Lige, there. How about his appetite? Over-eatin' or over-drinkin', which is worse? I heard Doc Brown tell him in the store — where he eat a whole mince pie — he'd be carried off quick some day ef he did n't look out. 'Lige was the brightest boy in school, but he's come to nothin' but sortin' a dozen letters every day for Uncle Sam. He has n't done a man's work for thirty year. He's the slave of appetite as much as me."

This attack on Belcher was a "bolt from the blue." The sympathetic smile left his face and he winced at the biting words. He shook his head in half protest, and then answered, looking up at Jude without resentment:

"You're a little hard on me, Jude, but in the main you're right. You'll get no stone from me."

"Thanks, 'Lige," said Jude. "Sorry if I spoke rough, but I'm in a mighty tight place an' must make my fight the best I can."

"Elijah has never disgraced the church, as you have," declared Harding. "Have you anything more to say against us four who sit in judgment on you?"

"I've known you, Deacon," declared Jude, "since I was knee-high to a grasshopper, and I don't remember a wrong act until poor Faith got in trouble. Now you're

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sufferin' from a hardenin' of the heart. It's a dum sight worse'n the arteries."

"If your head was harder," replied Harding, "you'd not be here to-night. What about Elder French?"

"David's a good boy, 'far's I know," answered Jude, "but he's young yet an' who kin tell how he'll stan' the acid test?"

"Not half as well as you," said French and at this Gray turned reproachfully and declared:

"Elder French, if you were not better than this man, you would have no right to hold the title of elder."

"It was two years ago," asserted French, almost resentfully. "I was only twenty-one and proud of the office, but I'd resign now if I did n't know 't would break my mother's heart."

"What's the matter with you, David?" questioned Belcher. "You're all right."

"There's lots worse fellers than Dave French," asserted Jude, "an' we're all earthen vessels, the best of us." Then, turning suddenly upon Crocker, he said, "Well, Brother Asa, you're mighty silent; what have you to say for or ag'in' me?"

Crocker's answer was prompt and decided. "I say you've disgraced the church for twenty year." He hesitated for a moment and finished with, "You'd ought to be cast out as a backslider."

"An' you feel that your own life is so spotless that you have a right to condemn me?"

"It's not spotless," answered Crocker, "but at least it's respectable."

"Meanin' you have n't been brought up in court like me. Well, Asa, what's this I found stickin' out o' your coat pocket?"

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As Jude spoke, he produced a flat bottle, and Crocker rose to take it, but Jude held it out of his reach.

"It's Jamaica ginger, for my dyspepsy," declared Crocker defiantly. "What right have you to it?"

"No right at all," observed Jude. "I don't want it an' I'll give it back, but first I'll use it as an exhibit in my case. Pastor, do you know what this mixture is?"

Gray, a little startled by the abrupt question and wondering what Jude had in mind, replied, "I do not know the ingredients, but it's a medicine in common use."

"Yes," observed Jude, "in very common use in a prohibition village like Wesley, all through the Adirondacks, an' in places where whiskey's off the map. It's called 'Jakey,' and 'Jakey' has a good many friends." He went to the desk, and, taking up a newspaper, continued, "Excuse me, Pastor, but the *Weekly Farmer* will shed light on this case. Here's what I want up in the corner, though the picture don't look much like Crocker: 'Stomach's Best Friend. Jamaica ginger enables you to eat what you like and plenty of it. Nothing better or more helpful and healthful. A delicious combination of ginger, aromatics, and French brandy, for the relief of cramps, pains, colds, chills, weakness, nervousness, and insomnia.' Now, tell me, Asa, is it the ginger, the aromatics, or the French brandy that you're lookin' for?"

"'T is the ginger, o'course," protested Crocker; "nothin' else helps my cramps. Some days they're awful, 'n' I feel as though a —"

"The brandy's only incidental like," interrupted Jude.

"Look-a-here, Jude," said Crocker indignantly, "you ain't no lawyer an' I ain't no criminal. Remember that, will ye?"

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"I'll remember it, but I think I have a right to an answer," urged Jude.

"O' course the brandy's only — incidental like — I did n't know there was any brandy in it."

"I'm not sure there is," responded Jude, "spite of the ad., but there's 'Oh, be joyful' of some kind, and you drink a bottle of it every day. Doc Brown says it's equal to three good drinks of whiskey — 'bout the same amount of alcohol. Now, Asa, with this exhibit — which I return to you — I want to ask if you have any rocks to heave at me."

This was too much for Crocker, who stammered, too angry to speak; and Harding interposed with —

"He takes it 'for sickness only.' Why should n't he?"

"M'm; his sickness is much like mine," persisted Jude, "only I prefer pure rye whiskey as a medicine for my complaint. The Bible says, 'Take a little wine for the stomach's sake,' an' Asa substitutes Jamaica ginger. He may be right in that, but I have my doubts. He must be copper-lined or 't would have burnt his innards out long ago."

Jude gave the bottle back to Crocker, who was about to break out into a torrent of words, his face aflame with anger, but Gray silenced him with a motion of his hand, and said:

"Jude Burt, I have allowed you to talk as you please, wishing to give you every chance to defend yourself. Instead, you have attacked others who are not to-night in question."

"'T was in self-defense, Pastor. I ain't got no ill-will 'gainst any one, least of all Asa here, 'spite of the fact that he ain't a real lovable character. Now, is he?"

As Jude spoke, he looked at the preacher almost plead-

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ingly, and Gray, avoiding an answer to Jude's question, said:

"I cannot understand the temptation of strong drink. You're a good man but for that. Can't you get the better of it — with the help of the Lord?"

"I've prayed my best, but the Lord don't seem to hear me," replied Jude. "Instead o' bein' blamed for gettin' drunk one night a week, I orter be given credit for bein' sober the other six. Each night I make my fight. Six times out o' seven I win. I don't know what you'll do with me, but I think, up above, they make allowance. What credit is there to you for not touchin' rum? You don't want it. There's no good marks comin' to me for not stuffin' myself like good old 'Lige here, God bless him! A plain meal o' victuals an' a moderate amount is all I want."

"But tell me how you feel when under the influence of alcohol?" questioned Gray, for he was curious as well as interested.

"I'll try to tell you, Pastor," answered Jude. "I come in on a wet Saturday night, chilled through. I have no wife, no children, an' sleep in a cold room at the stable. I go to the inn, get a hot supper, walk over to the club, sit down by the stove, an' take a drink. Then I forget the troubles of the road. I take another, an' forget that I am poor — that I have no home, no wife, no children. Another, an' pleasant faces come to me, some of them long lost. All these four know my story. When I was young, I loved Annie Rainsford, an' she liked me, too. I wanted her to marry me an' wait until I got on my feet. She an' her mother was poor an' pious, everythin' was against me, an' at last she married Harding here, who could give her mother a good home. I did n't blame her.

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I took to drink after that, an' she died a few years after Faith was born. Sometimes, when I am drunk enough, I am a boy again, an' Annie comes to me."

There was a long silence, Jude controlling himself with difficulty, and then Gray said:

"You are to blame, but I understand you better."

"Just one more word, Pastor," said Jude, "an' you must forgive me for bein' such a fool. All I can say about myself is that I love the good God who has done His best with me. I love this church, an' whether I am kept or not shall go to meetin' just the same. I'll take the back seat, close to the choir where Annie used to sing, an' where sometimes I can almost hear her voice. There's just one thing I want to ask of you afore I go. I've heard that Faith Harding, Annie's child — an' Enoch's, is likely to be expelled. She should be safe with her own father, but — maybe not. I tell you she's a good girl. Whatever you do with me, don't hurt poor Faith."

With this appeal, Jude turned abruptly to hide his emotion, seized his hat and coat, and disappeared through the door with both of them in his hand. After Jude's departure, there was a few moments' silence, and then the preacher cleared his throat and said:

"If there are no more remarks, you will now vote on the name of Judas I. Burt. Shall he, or shall he not, be expelled from this church?"

When French had taken up the ballots, he announced, "There are two votes for expulsion and two against."

Deacon Harding turned to Gray and said, "Preacher, you have the casting vote."

And Gray, without any hesitation, replied, "I vote that the name of Jude I. Burt remain on the church list, after public confession and promise of amendment."

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At this Harding's stern face grew sterner still, and he shook his head and frowned, as he protested, "I think you 're wrong, Pastor."

"Forgettin' Gideon, ain't ye?" questioned Crocker sneeringly.

Gray flushed at the tone of Crocker's question, and, looking directly at Asa, replied: "I'm forgetting nothing. You would do well to remember that I am the pastor of this church. Further, I think we have work to do right here in our midst." There was no mistaking his determination nor his indignation at Crocker's remark.

"You're sure right, Pastor," exclaimed Belcher. "I'm 's bad as Jude. I'll try to play the swine no longer."

"Good!" declared Gray approvingly. "What say you, Elder Crocker?"

At this direct question Crocker looked up resentfully, squirmed uncomfortably in his seat, and replied, "I don't see why I should suffer just 'cause Jude throws this up ag'in' me."

"He has made the case very plain," urged Gray. "Remember, 'If meat cause my brother to offend,¹ I will eat no more meat.' Your course is clear. I shall leave it to your own conscience."

The preacher consulted the paper on his desk, and said, "The last name on the list is that of Faith Harding." After a moment's hesitation he looked at the Deacon and continued: "This is a difficult task for all of us, but doubly sad for you. Do you wish to withdraw while we act on this name?"

To this Harding replied promptly, as if his mind were already prepared for the ordeal before him: "I am the Deacon of this church. My place is here. You need n't fear. I'll do my duty."

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The preacher bowed his head in acquiescence, and continued: "Faith Harding has given birth to a child — out of wedlock. She has shown no sign of repentance. She has not appeared to-night in answer to the summons. What is your wish?"

As the clergyman finished, French turned and looked to the open door, as he had done again and again during the evening. This time he saw standing on the threshold a young girl, dressed in gray poplin, with a Leghorn hat, trimmed with blue ribbon, in her hand. Their eyes met for a moment, and then she turned and went away, unseen by the others.

Belcher declared: "Faith's not a bad girl. I should hate to see her expelled." And Harding said: "She has disgraced the church, herself, an' me." When Crocker urged, "Her goin's-on are known to all the village; think of her teachin' her Sabbath-School class o' young girls; she must be made an example of," French intervened with, "'Let him who is without sin cast the first stone' at her."

"Until Faith got into this trouble, she was all right," observed Belcher. "The village was proud of her. She graduated first in her class at the academy."

"Where is she now?" inquired Gray.

And when Belcher replied, "Alice Hale took her in," he asked, "Who is Alice Hale?"

"She's a village girl," declared Belcher. "She ain't got no father nor mother; she's been engaged to Fred Miller for a long time. An' she's got such a talent that they gave her a scholarship down in the paintin' school in the city. She went to Paris for a year an' then came back to the village."

"Yes," interrupted Crocker, "an' little good she got in

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travelin'. Even the big revival did n't touch her, an' she came back full of sinful notions. She hired Frazer's cottage an' turned his old barn into what she calls a 'studio.' I collect the rent for the widow Frazer, an' if she's a day late, out she goes."

"She's right next door to us," explained Belcher; and then turned to Crocker with, "Rather hard on the girl, ain't ye, Elder?"

To this Crocker vouchsafed no reply, but continued: "She does n't come to church, an' paints on Sundays same as week-days. She has figgers o' naked men an' women all about her. She's an infidel."

"An infidel!" exclaimed Gray. "She does n't believe in God and the Bible?"

"No," replied Crocker, "an' she says she'll take her chance o' goin' to heaven with any member o' this church."

"Well, infidel or not," protested Belcher, "she's got a kind heart, as well as a pretty face. She took Faith in when the Deacon cast her off. No one offered her a home. I'd took her, — castin' no reflections on her father, who was honest accordin' to his conscience, — but my wife threatened to leave me if I did. Women are dreadful hard on a girl who makes the great mistake."

"What should they do when a girl comes back with a child — an' no father?" asked Crocker.

"I say they should help her," declared Belcher heartily. "Jude says 't was the story of the Good Samaritan over again. We was the priests an' Levites, an' Alice was the Good Samaritan."

Crocker was eager to continue the argument, but all were silent when Deacon Harding spoke. He paid no attention to the others, and talked to the preacher as if

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he were alone with him. "When I found she was in trouble, I was almost crazy. What I said to her, I don't know. She left me without a word. When she came back a month ago, she had her baby with her. I met her at the door, for she would not come in until I asked her. I told her I would give them both a home if she would tell me who had wronged her. I vowed that he should make her an honest woman if I took him by the throat and carried him to the parson. She only smiled and shook her head and said, 'When he comes to me of his own free will and asks for me, I'll marry him. Until then I'll not say a word. I'll not trouble him.' Then I was crazy again . . . then I cast her out."

"You sent her away?" asked the preacher. "How has she lived?"

"I don't know," answered Harding.

"I do, then," declared Belcher. "She sells stories to the magazines. She makes them up out of her own head."

Harding still kept his eyes fixed on Gray's face and continued, as if he had not been interrupted: "I brought her up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. I watched over her and prayed with her, night and morning. She was my only child."

"She *was* your child!" exclaimed Gray. "What is she now?"

"Yes," said Belcher, "you speak of her as if she was dead, instead o' livin' just the other side o' the fence, within call o' your voice."

"I think of her as dead," declared Harding. "I was so proud of her when she stood at the head of her class — dressed all in white. O God! My Faith, dressed all in white!"

Harding spoke the last words with difficulty, and sud-

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denly buried his face in his hands and began to sob. The tears were running down Belcher's face and he tried to comfort Harding, patting him on the shoulder. Every one was too overcome to speak, until Harding rose suddenly, throwing off Belcher's hand from his arm, and exclaimed fiercely:

"I have cast her from my house, and she shall be cast out of this church. 'The sow that was washed has turned to her wallowing in the mire!'"

He sank back in his chair, and again there was silence, until Belcher protested, "Those words may be in the Bible, but father or no father, you ought not to speak of Faith like that."

"Don't you still love your child?" asked Gray, shocked by the awful words.

"I love her so — I almost hate her!" replied Harding, taking his hands from his face, but not looking up. "Whether I love her or not, whether she's my child or not, I say she shall be expelled."

"An' I say she shall not if my vote will save her," protested Belcher, rising to his feet and turning to French with, "You'll stay with me, David, won't you?"

"I shall not say — how I shall vote," replied French.

"Good God! man, are you against her too?" exclaimed Belcher.

To this French made no reply, and Belcher dropped his huge bulk back in the chair, which creaked under him.

Gray looked from one to the other and asked: "Are you ready for the vote?"

French once more passed out the ballots, collected them, and announced in a low voice, "The vote is two in favor and two against her expulsion."

At this they all looked to Gray, who hesitated a long

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time, and finally spoke very slowly and distinctly: "I hesitate to take the responsibility for this decision. Yet I see no reason why Faith Harding should not be expelled. She has sinned grievously. She has not come here to-night in answer to our summons."

He was evidently about to vote with Crocker and Harding for Faith's expulsion, when there came the sound of quick footsteps on the path and piazza, and Alice Hale came into the room. She was dressed in a tight-fitting gown, faded by frequent washing to an old-rose tint. Over her shoulders she had thrown an Oriental scarf, a rainbow of colors, strangely in contrast with everything else in the room. She advanced until she stood between French and the preacher, making herself one of the circle. She looked in turn into every face, her eyes finally meeting those of the preacher, who was vaguely conscious of her grace and beauty. Her hair was dusky and her eyes were dark, dilated with excitement and repressed emotion. She spoke in a low voice, slowly and at first with difficulty.

"Faith came to this door — looked in — and went away." Once more she looked at the stern faces before her and said, almost under her breath, "I do not wonder."

There was a touch of scorn in her voice, which Crocker was quick to resent. "Miss Hale, this Board's not settin' here to please you nor Faith Harding."

Only Gray had risen at Alice Hale's entrance, and they faced each other with the desk between them. He now motioned to a vacant chair, and said, "Miss Hale, will you take a seat?"

"Thank you, no," she answered. "I shall stay with you but a moment. I left Faith in tears. What do you mean to do with her?"

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She asked the question of Gray, and he answered: "I think we shall expel her from this church. She has greatly sinned."

"What is sin?"

"Sin is the breaking of God's just law," replied Gray calmly, in spite of the challenge in her tone and manner.

"The Bible says, 'For all have sinned.' I suppose that means Faith and me and even — *you*."

"Yes," answered Gray, "but you are not a professing Christian, and I, in spite of sin, have not disgraced my profession. Your sins I do not know."

"And shall not. I would rather tell them to a merciful God," declared Alice bitterly. She looked from one to another of the stern faces before her, and, turning to Gray again, asked, "Are there degrees of sin?"

"Yes," he replied.

"There are big sins and little sins?"

"There are no little sins," declared Gray; and then continued, "Some sins are greater than others."

"And you dare measure them?" asked Alice, with growing scorn in her voice. "Have you the rule, with moral feet and inches marked upon it?"

So disdainful was she that Gray flushed to the very brow, but his voice was calm as he answered, "I dare to measure sin with the Bible as my guide."

"You dare!" exclaimed Alice. "Is there a sin immeasurable — unpardonable?"

"Yes," replied Gray, "the sin against the Holy Ghost."

"That is what the Bible says," declared Alice, "but man has changed it. Man says it is Faith's sin that has no forgiveness. Use your Bible rule and you will find Faith's sin is no worse than lying, stealing, or even covetousness."

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"She is not penitent," asserted Gray.

"Not penitent! She has sinned, and suffered, and repented. A stern God — a sterner man should forgive her. 'To know all is to pardon all.' Do not judge Faith until you see and talk with her. I have no claim — and yet — I — beg — this kindness — from you."

Her voice broke, and there was a sob in it as she finished. She made the appeal with extended hands and with pleading eyes. Gray for a long time made no answer. The clock ticked loudly on the mantel, and the Elders moved uncomfortably in their seats. At last Gray lifted his eyes from the desk, and looking straight at Alice, said:

"She should have come before the Board to-night. Yet I will be fair with her. I will see Faith Harding to-morrow."

CHAPTER VII

So wearied was Gray after the meeting of the Board that he had gone to bed and to sleep as soon as the Deacon and the Elders had taken their departure. Alice Hale's dramatic entrance, her challenge and final appeal, left them all rather dazed and they had parted with but few words.

Waking early, the preacher went over the incidents of the evening one by one. He did not regret the expulsion of Fred Miller, who was, by his own admission, living a careless and unchristian life. Miller's fashionable clothes, his glib tongue, and, above all, his patronizing manner, had awakened a spirit of resentment which a night's calm sleep did not cool. Gray felt that Abigail Green's bitter tongue deserved slitting, as in the old days it would have been. His first doubt was of his judgment on Jude. The stage-driver admitted he was an habitual drunkard, that he had nearly killed a man in anger, and that he had been tried in court and found guilty. Harding and Crocker had voted for his expulsion. Was it wise to keep this notorious backslider in the church? Why had he, who had taken Gideon for an example, allowed this weak soldier to stay in the ranks? Self-analysis was a passion with the preacher, and he could not deny that the story of the stage-driver had influenced his sentiment and silenced his reason. There was something in Jude that had made a blow seem brutal. To expel him from the church was like kicking a dog who had run away and returned wagging his tail. Gray realized that he had been inconsistent, but, strangely enough, he had little regret for his

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inconsistency. He determined that his justification would be the reformation of Jude, the snatching of this kind-hearted, generous man "like a brand from the burning."

But why had he postponed his decision on Faith? For this there was no excuse. Her sin was flagrant, her own father voted against her. Jude had expressed his regret, his repentance, and his determination to struggle against his besetting sin, but Faith had come to the door and gone away. He had decided to give judgment against Faith, when Alice Hale had entered and silenced him almost as if she had placed her hand on his lips; Alice Hale, the infidel! He could picture her plainly, and remember every word she had spoken — "Faith came to the door, looked in, and went away, — I do not wonder." How scornfully her dark eyes had swept over the others and rested finally on him. "What is sin?" "That means Faith, and me, and even *you*." This was like the lash of a whip. His heart was hot within him as he thought how bitterly she had spoken. Why had he not silenced her? — "I have no claim, and yet I beg this kindness of you." He had yielded to this appeal. How could he have been so weak? He condemned himself without excuse or palliation, his only consolation being that he had but postponed his decision.

He rose from his bed resolved to deal severely with Faith that very morning. So preoccupied was he that he did not bid Linda "Good-morning" — a neglect which she resented, but the hot pincers of the Inquisition would not have forced her to show any sign. Repression was a habit with her and she had learned long ago to conceal her feelings.

After breakfast Gray put on his hat and went out into the garden, walked up and down the narrow paths, and

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finally took his seat on the old bench under the canopy of the vine. This morning, however, he did not look up to see the tracery of green leaves, the purple and the red of the mingled fruit. He did not even think of the round arms that had reached over his head. What should he say to Faith? What need he say? It was her task to explain, defend or appeal. He had a feeling almost of disgust as he thought of meeting this sinner. As he sat with his back to the fence, there came the shrill cry of a child. It was Faith's, and it sounded to him different from the wail of a babe of honest parentage. The cry lasted but a moment when it was stilled by a voice saying, "There, there, poor baby," followed by a little crooning song. It was Alice Hale, the same voice he had heard last night, strong in its challenge and protest. Now it was tender, soft, and caressing. He recognized the strange appeal it made to him, but he would not yield to it. He rose, firm in his resentment, jealous of his dignity, and fully conscious of his authority as Christ's minister. He strode down his own path and swung through the gate of his neighbor, master of himself and determined to master others.

The Frazer house was about the size of the parsonage, but lacked the ornamentation of white pillars and fresh paint. Another year would make it shabby. It was set near the street, and attached to its kitchen was the barn, an arrangement which allowed free passage from front door to haymow, without exposure to the weather.

The Frazer barn, until its owner's death, had been the domicile of two horses and a cow. The only architectural additions to change it into a studio had been the cutting of a large window in the slanting roof, with its attachment of a green curtain on pulleys. There still remained

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the three stalls, two of them separated by a swinging board. There were still a few wisps of hay in the mow, and on the walls were pegs from which hung fragments of old harness. Two rusty pitchforks leaned against the grain chest, and on the wall was hung a currycomb, brush, and whip, long unused.

On this warm September morning the big sliding door had been pushed back, showing the little lawn spreading from its threshold. This had once been a driveway, as was proven by the ruts in the grass which led to a wide gate, weather-beaten and with here and there a picket missing. To the left of the gate was a young maple tree, its foliage in the full glory of autumn. It was like a flame of fire, with the sun shining on its leaves, tinged with yellow and tipped with crimson. In the distance the village roofs and the elm trees were dominated by the white spire of the church, its clock pointing to half-past eight.

In the center of the room Alice Hale was seated at her easel painting rapidly. On a table back of her was a vase of late roses and a dish containing grapes and apples. On a pedestal near her was a plaster Apollo and a little farther off a Greek dancing girl, both of them nudes. A lay figure reclined awkwardly in a broken chair. There were numerous canvases leaning with their faces to the wall. In the double stall stood Faith Harding, bending over the manger full of hay, on which there was a baby's form, wrapped in a white blanket. The bright light streamed through the barred window at the back of the stall, shining like a halo around Faith's head. She was dressed in a cashmere gown of virgin blue and an old camel's-hair shawl was thrown over her head and shoulders. She was young, slender, and beautiful, and her face was like a cameo against the dark wood of the stall.

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Alice Hale wore an old linen smock, stained and splashed by as many colors of paint as decorated her palette. The sleeves were loose and turned up to the elbows. Her hair was gathered in a loose coil at her neck. She hummed a little tune, reminiscent of her student days in Paris, as she carried the colors deftly from palette to canvas. Minute after minute passed, until she paused with a long sigh and asked: "Are you tired, dear?"

"Not much," was the reply. "I like to watch the baby, too. He's smiling in his sleep."

"An angel whispering," declared Alice. "I'm tired, if you're not, so we'll both rest."

Faith folded the shawl close around the baby, then stood upright, stretched her arms above her head, and went to the picture, looking over Alice's shoulder.

"How much you've done this morning!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said Alice, "it's getting on pretty well. I wish I had my old master here to show me how to help it."

"Tell me about Paris," demanded Faith; "the gray roofs, the crowded boulevards, the winding river, most of all about the Latin Quarter, where you lived. You know I've never been out of the Adirondacks. Paris seems in the moon to me. Don't forget about the students who called you 'The Marble Diana.'"

"'T was often 'Wet Paint.'"

"Yes, and that meant, 'Don't touch me.'"

"And a good name, too, though I did n't like it then, for no one wants to be thought a prude. There were lots of girls that lost their heads so far from home. Life was so exciting and different. I was n't 'marble' either. There was one of the students I liked very much: a student chap from Avignon."

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"The one who died?" interrupted Faith.

"Yes, the one who died," answered Alice. "Cold and starvation did it. He was the best painter of us all. God only knows what he might have done. Come, let's to work. I don't like to think of him."

"Shall I take the pose again?" asked Faith.

"No," replied Alice, "you're tired, I'll paint the stall. Unless I sell a picture soon or you a story, I'll be painting real boards with a big brush — like this." She said this with a wide sweep of her arm.

"We lived three months on your picture of Granny Jenk's cottage, and my story, 'A Country Romance,' kept us half as long. I'm sure the ravens will feed us," declared Faith confidently.

"Will they? Not much!" replied Alice. "I've never seen a crow in the Adirondacks that could do anything more than keep silent when he was stealing the farmer's corn and cry, 'Caw, caw,' when he was flying away. You'll soon see me swinging from a ridgepole, swashing a sign for Heinz Pickles on some weather-beaten barn. How do you think I'm getting you?"

"You're making me much too beautiful," answered Faith.

"Now you're fishing for a compliment," laughed Alice. "They're not good for little girls, and I shan't bite. If you were n't here to hear me, I would say Leonardo might have painted you or Bastien-Le Page, or — the man from Avignon — who died. I can't quite catch your expression. Your mouth is humble, but your eyes are proud, my lady. That's hard to paint. Besides, you're getting too much color in your cheeks. Where did you go this morning?"

"To the top of Cedar Hill," replied Faith, "and back

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through the woods. I met Maud Green in front of the church. She stared as if she'd never known me. I know I must pay the price, but it hurts."

"Only the price of innocence," protested Alice, "and that you've paid long ago. Don't you mind. What do you care about Maud?"

She rose as she spoke, put her arm around Faith's neck and kissed her.

"I've got to see the preacher, too, this morning. He's likely to be here any minute."

"I know it, little girl, I have n't forgotten, but I thought it would occupy your mind to keep on with the work. What would you rather do?"

"I'm awfully afraid of him. What shall I say?"

"Just the truth, and don't, above all things, be afraid of him. A minister's only a man, after all."

"He'll try to make me tell what father wants to know."

"Faith, why don't you? Have n't you shielded your lover long enough? It's splendid of you, darling, but why should you bear the load alone?"

At this moment there was a knock on the door followed immediately by Bateese, his blue apron tucked into his waist and a basket on his arm. He greeted them with a cheerful, "Good-morning, Mees Hale. It make very fine day, Mees Harding, — 'ello, Mike!" With the last gruff greeting, Bateese took the limp hand of the manikin and shook it.

"Don't be fresh, Bateese," interposed Alice. "He's a great man. Say, '*Buon giorno, Signore Michel Angelo*' — he only understands Italian."

"Me speak not Italian," declared Bateese. "Me do not like heem."

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"But why?" inquired Faith; "what's he done to harm you?"

As Bateese was about to answer, Kitty Maguire entered, the plump maid-of-all-work, her sleeves rolled up to the elbows, a smudge on one red cheek. "Me t'ink he mak' beeg luv at Keety w'en I'm not here. He show de goo-goo eye at 'er. Mabee he kiss her on de sly. I don't know; 'ave you kees Keety, Mike? You 'ave? Den I geev you beeg poonch—lak dat." As he said this, Bateese put himself in a fighting position and struck the manikin with his fist.

"'T is a brave man you are, Bateese," observed Kitty scornfully. "You would n't hit him could he use his hands. Come, give me the groceries, and quit your foolin'."

"Here is *le thé, le sucre, le* butter, and *le* beef. De bill, it is three dollar an' ten cent."

"Three dollars and ten cents!" exclaimed Alice, going to an old teapot in the corner and pouring out the cash. "'T is rent day and the Elder will be here soon. No beef to-day. Take it back and bring me a nice young juicy codfish in its place. I'll be a vegetarian, the way the teapot looks. How much do I owe you now?"

"Not very mooch," replied Bateese. "One dollar and a half a dollar too. I bring the codfish purty queeck."

As he took his departure, Kitty called out, "*Je t'adore*, Bateese."

"*Mon dieu!*" he cried, hurrying away.

"Why, Kitty! What's that you said?" asked Alice.

"*Je t'adore*," repeated Kitty. "'T is the French for 'Good-day.' Bateese is after teachin' me. He sez, '*Je t'aime*,' and I sez, '*Je t'adore*.'"

"The wretch!" exclaimed Alice. "He's told you that

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he loves you, and you've said that you adore him."

"The little devil!" said Kitty, as she disappeared through the door into the kitchen.

"So Maud could n't see you," observed Alice. "Well, I saw *her* a few nights ago, standing in her doorway. Redny Feathers was with her. Maud wore a white blouse and the drummer's coat-sleeve was — black. Thoughtless of Maud, was n't it?"

"She's forgetful about me anyway," declared Faith sadly. "Only Jude is just the same. He's like a father to me."

"And your own father?" inquired Alice.

"Poor Dad! Though he shows no sign, he loves me even more than dear old Jude."

At the mention of the name, Jude himself entered with a large package in his hand, evidently a picture, and Alice exclaimed loudly, "'Speaking of the devil' —"

Jude set the picture down carefully against the wall, and then remarked reproachfully, "The same sayin' goes with 'angels,' an' it sounds better — to me. How's the Good Samaritan to-day — 'Mornin', Faith, how're you feelin'?"

"Jude, we were both well until you came in and called me 'Good Samaritan,'" declared Alice. "If you ever do it again, I warn you I'll — I'll paint your portrait."

At this threat, Jude, with entreating hands, protested; "See here, Alice, that's awful. Have a heart. I'd rather be b'iled in ile like one of the Christian martyrs than painted in ile by you."

"Well, I give you warning, solemn warning," declared Alice, "so don't call me 'Good Samaritan' again. And speaking of Christian martyrs reminds me that you went before the Board, too. Did they expel you?"

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At this Jude's smiling countenance grew serious. "No, but I had a mighty close shave. Crocker an' the Deacon was ag'in' me. They did n't take much trouble to hide their feelin's, nor intentions. Belcher an' David, I think, stuck to me, an' the pastor must have took my side. He had the castin' vote, you see. I think he's an awful nice young man, spite o' the fact he's so terrible down on sinners. He's clean an' honest, an' he must have a heart somewhere, or he would n't take the part of a miserable backslider like me."

"So he's down on sinners?" asked Alice, with a toss of her head. "Well, Jesus Christ was n't down on them. Gray's a pious, narrow-minded bigot. His heart's a turnip — a hard, frozen turnip."

"You're wrong, Alice," protested Jude. "You're wrong; he's young yet an' he'll learn a lot."

"I hate him for his piety and his prudishness," declared Alice. "I'll never forget how he looked at me last night when he said, 'Your sins I do not know,' and, 'I dare to measure sin with the Bible as my guide.' I'd like to shock him. He's been shut in a theological school for years. He's only half alive. He does n't know as much as you, Jude, about real religion, and he's as hard as Crocker. That reminds me, the Elder will be here soon looking for the rent."

"An' that reminds me," spoke up Jude, opening the express-book in his hand, "that there's a little charge of fifty cents due me for express. It is n't often one gets *ahead* of Asa, an' if a man comes *after*, he's darn likely to find the well's run dry, no matter how hard he pumps."

Alice went to the teapot again, paid Jude, and remarked: "It's no joking matter, Jude. Unless I sell a

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picture or Faith a story soon, we won't be able either to pay rent or buy food. I suppose we'll have to play two Nebuchadnezzars on the lawn."

"Not while I've a cent left," said Jude. "It's mighty tender grass, but you'd tire of it after a spell."

Faith had lost her cheerfulness the moment the question of the church had come up. "What do you think they'll do with me!" she asked.

"I don't know, Faith," replied Jude, "an' I confess I'm worried. I waited outside an' caught Belcher on his way home. He says the matter rests until the pastor sees you. He's likely to come any minute. You oughter been there last night. It hurt you stayin' away."

"I suppose it did," said Faith. "I went to the door. I could n't go in."

"Why did n't you, Faith?" asked Alice. "You're not afraid of them."

"No," she answered. "I can't tell you why."

"Don't try to, then," advised Jude. "It'll come out all right, but you'll have to make public confession of sin an' repentance before the church. I've got to do it, an', though I don't hanker after the job, I'd take a double dose if they'd let you off."

"I'm sure you would, and I would, too," said Alice. "Unless the preacher has a heart of stone, he'll be good to Faith when he sees her."

"His heart's all right, if you can reach it," ventured Jude.

"I wish I could reach it," observed Alice.

"You would n't have to reach," remarked Jude. "Why, Alice, I'm all glowin' now from the touch of your hand."

"Jude, you're a very impressionable young man. The

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preacher is n't like you. I wonder if he could be brought to life. I wonder . . ."

"Well, I'd do anything to help you both," declared Jude. "Even my pocket-book is yours, though there ain't much in it. Are you really short o' cash?"

"We are, Jude," replied Alice, "and it's beginning to look like the typewriter for Faith and a house-painter's job for me. What would you give me to paint the stage-coach — sunflowers on the dashboard and a tiger behind to scare the little boys from stealing a ride?"

"I don't want to scare no boys," asserted Jude. "Paint the tiger on the dashboard an' if it scares Patience out of a walk, I'll pay you."

"I agree," declared Alice, "and perhaps you'd better pay me in advance, for here comes Asa."

As she spoke, Elder Crocker's lank figure appeared in the doorway, and was greeted cordially by Jude.

"Why, if here ain't my old friend Asa. It's good for sore eyes to see your smilin' countenance. Do ye often call on the ladies so early in the mornin'?" He seized Asa's hand and shook it vigorously.

It was with difficulty that the Elder succeeded in releasing his tortured palm from Jude's hearty grasp. "Quit yer foolin'," he demanded. "The Bible says that sinners stand on slippery places. Ye come mighty near bein' slid clean outer church last night. I ain't callin', I've come for the rent of this barn."

"Studio, you mean," suggested Alice.

"I call it a barn," persisted Crocker, "but pay me the rent an' call it what ye like."

"Here it is, Elder," said Alice. "It takes my last dollar, too. What would you have done with me if I had n't paid you?"

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"Turned you out to-morrow," answered Crocker, putting the cash in his wallet and giving Alice her receipt. "The village o' Wesley would be well red of you an' your silly paintin's an' your naked statues an' — o' Faith, too."

He was almost at the door, to which Jude followed him. "That's not a pretty way to speak to a lady, Elder. Sometime I'm afraid I'll lose my temper with you an' say or do somethin' I'll be sorry for." So fierce was the stage-driver that Crocker departed quickly, not wishing to continue a conversation so threatening.

The church clock began to strike as the Elder reached the gate. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve; then, after a little pause, came another peal. "Thirteen o'clock!" exclaimed Jude. "By gracious, Elder, as late as that? Head her off, Asa, she's runnin' away, same as you."

CHAPTER VIII

As Elder Crocker went out of the front gate, Fred Miller appeared. He wore a brown suit of clothes, the work of the very best Albany tailor. He had a pink in his button-hole, and had been admired by all the population of Wesley who saw him as he came down the street. He was greeted cordially by Jude as he entered the doorway of the studio.

"Well, if here is n't the third backslider!" exclaimed Alice. "What did they do with you last night?"

"I'm expelled," he replied, — "cast into outer darkness."

"Oh, Fred," said Faith, "I'm so sorry."

"You need n't be," assured Miller. "The Methodist Church of Wesley can go to Hades for all me."

"It is n't heading that way, Fred," interposed Jude. "I know you're sore, but what else could they do? Would n't they have put you out of your Albany club if you'd broke its rules an' 'lowed yourself that you did n't belong with them?"

"I lost my temper with the frozen-faced hypocrites or I should n't have admitted that," said Miller.

"You're a good feller, Fred," continued Jude "but, you see, you're not a Christian an' ain't even tryin' to be. In spite of our shortcomin's, Faith an' me really love the Lord, an' that makes a big difference. As the Good Book says, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.' Only David voted for you. I can't understand Dave. He said, so Belcher says, that he's too great a sinner himself to expel any one else. If that's so, why's he an elder?"

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"That was n't his fault," declared Alice. "They made him one when his father died. He took his father's place and he's a good boy, too, to stand out against the other three."

"Everybody's fond of Dave," remarked Jude. "He's the best baseball player in Wesley. He pitched on his college team, an' they say the New Yorks was after him. They'll be after me, too, at the Junction unless I start right off. I hope my untamed steeds ain't run away."

When Jude took his departure, Faith went into the house and Miller was left alone with Alice.

"It's all the fault of that hard-shelled preacher that they treated me the way they did last night," he declared. "Even that old fanatic, Harding, and sour-faced Asa would have let me alone if they had n't been egged on by Gray."

"I hate him!" exclaimed Alice. "Why should he be so hard on poor Faith? I pity her from the bottom of my heart, and — I'm a little sorry for you."

"Are you sorry enough to — console me?" he asked.

"Must we go through with that again?" responded Alice.

"Please," begged Miller, coming close to her, and trying to take her hand. "I'll forget all about the church and take you for my saint instead."

"Me for a saint!" laughed Alice.

"You know I worship you," he protested. "Won't you marry me? You know how much I love you."

"What's the use, Fred? I'm wedded to my art," replied Alice, smiling.

"Does your art make a good husband?" he asked.

"He's charming, but I must confess he lacks some useful qualities. He's not what they call a 'good provider.'"

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There's my last picture back again after spending a month in a Fifth Avenue shop-window. I would n't accept the price of canvas and frame, so back it comes to me."

"Why keep up the struggle?" he pleaded. "We'll spend the winter in Albany, go to Italy in the spring — to Florence, Rome, and Venice."

"All the kingdoms of the world!" exclaimed Alice. "Get thee behind me, Satan. Fred, I really think you care for me a little, but I come nearer loving Jude than any man on earth, and he won't look at me with Faith around."

Miller turned away at this, with, "If you make a joke of it, I'm off. As long as you wear my ring, I consider I'm bound to you, and I know you care for no one else or you would n't wear it. I've waited a long time now. Can't you give me some hope before I go away?"

"Just a little, perhaps," she replied, following Miller toward the door and putting her hand on his shoulder. "I confess I'm getting tired of the struggle. I'm sick of honest poverty. I've a modest wish for a fresh pair of shoes, and occasionally an insane desire for a new gown comes to me."

"I'll take you to Lucille to-morrow," he urged.

"No, Fred, not yet — perhaps never. You've been very patient with me and I must be fair with you. Listen: I think every woman should marry — for love, if she can; if not, without it. Sometimes she's happier unhappily married than not married at all. That's rather mixed and sounds dreadful, but — I think you understand. I want a home, and a child even, if I have to take a husband to get them. That does n't sound very romantic, but I'm just like thousands of other women. Are you coming home Thanksgiving Day?"

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"I surely will come," he insisted, and tried to take her hand again, but she would not give it to him.

"I'll tell you a secret, Fred. Every girl has a dream man. Sometimes he comes, but usually not. I'm beginning to think mine has lost his way. I want the dream man, but I want affection and a home. I'll give you this promise. If no man turns up whom I really love and you ask me very prettily, I'll give you something to make you really thankful on Thanksgiving Day."

"That's splendid!" he exclaimed, trying to take her in his arms, but she repulsed him and shook her head, with the warning:

"Don't be too confident. I shall pray every night and morning that my dream man may come to me. I'd join the Methodist Church and sit at the feet of that detestable Parson Gray if I thought it would do any good."

"And I," declared Miller, "backslider though I am, will pray your dream man may not come. Good-bye, Alice."

"Good-bye, Fred," said Alice. And Miller took his departure, encouraged and hopeful for the future. Alice walked up and down the studio a few times with her eyes on the floor, then drew the green curtain higher to shut out the sun, and, resuming her seat, continued painting the boards of the stall. She had worked in silence some little time when Abigail Green entered. She was dressed in a shabby calico dress of doubtful color, her sleeves were rolled up to her elbows, and there was a mark of flour on her forehead. She carried a very large crockery cup in her hand.

Alice greeted her with a cheerful, "Good-morning, Miss Green; baking?"

"Yes," answered Abby, "I'm makin' cake, 'n' find I

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ain't got no sugar. Could I borry a cup from you? I don't want to buy nothin' more from Crocker until next month."

"Glad to help you, Miss Green," said Alice. "I'll be back in a minute."

She kept her word, and, while she was gone, Abby examined the painting doubtfully and sniffed scornfully at the statues. When Alice returned she gave the sugar to Miss Green with —

"That 's the largest cup I ever saw. What do you use it for?"

"I drink tea outer it," replied Miss Green.

"Well," declared Alice, "one cup ought to be enough. It's almost as large as a bathtub."

Ignoring this criticism, Abby started for the door, but stopped at the threshold to remark, "Fred Miller's been to see you this mornin', ain't he?"

"Yes," answered Alice. "Why?"

"Oh, nothin'," returned Miss Green. "Is he feelin' bad 'bout bein' expelled last night?"

"Perhaps," replied Alice.

"I thought," continued Abby, "seein' you an' him is engaged he 'd probably speak about it."

Alice's face was growing less sympathetic each moment, and at the last remark it hardened. "If you say we're engaged, I suppose there 's no use saying yes or no."

"Jude 'n' Faith oughter been put out, too, same as Fred," declared Abby.

This was too much for Alice, who rose from her seat, with flashing eyes. Though she bit her lips to restrain her anger, she could not refrain from saying: "That's your opinion, Miss Green. I think differently. I'm also of the opinion that any one who speaks against my friends

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sught not to stay in my studio. I will only say that, having borrowed the sugar, you should be about your baking and I my painting. Shut the gate hard, the latch is bad."

"I meant just what I said 'bout Faith 'n' Jude," was Abby's last shot.

With Miss Green's disappearance, Alice's anger quickly died away, and for a time she walked up and down the room in deep thought. Once she exclaimed under her breath, "Do I dare do it!" and at last, her mind evidently made up, she resumed her painting until Faith returned.

"Come, model," commanded Alice in tones of affected sternness, "I'm tired painting the boards of that stall."

"Are you?" asked Faith, laughing. "But think what a good practice it is for the barn doors."

"I decline to smile," declared Alice; "come to your place."

"Just a minute," begged Faith, "while I fix the blanket around the baby."

Then she took her pose again, asking, "Am I right now, Alice?"

"Bend a trifle more, chin lower. That's right," declared Alice approvingly.

For a little while she painted silently, and when she spoke she had become serious again.

"Faith, let me talk a little while with Mr. Gray before he speaks to you."

"Why, Alice?"

"Trust me."

"Of course I trust you, but don't be so mysterious. Tell me more."

"I want to break through that hard shell of his. I

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want to show him that there's something in this world besides law and duty and repentance and punishment."

"He knows that."

"Of course. The man is n't stone-blind, but he has an awful mental astigmatism."

"You can't cure that in a few minutes' talk."

"I think I could help him. I might show him a little of '*la joie de vivre*.'"

"The joy of life in a single lesson?" laughed Faith. "What a wonderful teacher you must be, or do you depend on the brightness of your scholar?"

"The man's bright enough — on some things," declared Alice, "but I don't believe he's superior to all earthly frailties, though he is a clergyman. Good gracious! There he is now!" she cried, as a dark figure appeared at the wide door and knocked. She waited for a second knock, however, before she said, "Come in."

Gray entered the door, conscious of his dignity and firm of purpose. As he came forward, he caught sight of Faith standing in the stall. For some reason which she could not explain she kept her pose, and Gray was so impressed by the vision of the Madonna that he hesitated before he turned to Alice, who had risen to meet him.

"Good-morning, Mr. Gray," she said, lifting the twisted figure of the manikin out of the chair to make a place for him. She did not offer him her hand, and he noticed the omission and understood it. She then turned to Faith and said, "You may rest now. Go into the garden for a little while."

For a moment Faith hesitated, then she turned and went quietly out of the big door.

Left together, Gray and Alice stood face to face for a moment, silent, each remembering their meeting of the

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night before, each conscious of intense antagonism. They were like two duelists, with rapiers in their hands, each studying and appraising the other, before the "*en garde*" had been uttered.

They were both good to look upon, Gray grave, earnest, sincere, clear-eyed, and confident. Alice, more subtle, with a half smile on her face which might mean anything, looked at her antagonist through narrowed lids. Gray was the first to speak.

"I've come to see Faith Harding."

"You have seen her," answered Alice; "that was Faith," pointing to the open door.

"Faith!" exclaimed Gray wonderingly.

"Yes, why not?"

"I did n't think to see a face like that; I thought her older, too." He was disconcerted and realized that his antagonist had touched him, even though it was but a slight wound. "Is that her baby in the manger?" he asked, pointing to the little bundle wrapped in the white blanket and resting on the hay.

"Yes. When Faith's father cast her out, it was evening. She knew no one in the village who would take her in. She wandered along the street, saw the open door, and crept into the barn. The next morning I found her lying on the straw, and the baby sleeping in the manger. Poor little girl!"

"Yes — poor girl. I'm sorry for her, but suffering must follow sin."

"Always?"

"Yes, always. Faith has brought disgrace upon the church, which should be pure and beautiful. You are an artist and have your ideals. Mine is a glorious church, holy and without blemish."

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He spoke earnestly, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bright, a defender of the Faith before an unbelieving world, as personified by Alice Hale, the infidel.

"Why are you so hard?" she asked.

"I am not hard. I seek a perfect church."

"And I a perfect picture," declared Alice. "I have failed, and so will you and all others who seek perfection. That is my first Madonna. What do you think of it?"

She pointed to the picture, and Gray came to her side and studied it carefully. When he lifted his eyes from the canvas, he said:

"It is profanation to use a girl like Faith for your model. It is sacrilege to take a child of sin for the Baby Christ."

"Come in the stall and look at him," she commanded, going before him. "Would you know him from a child whose parents had been married in a church? Tell me how he differs."

"I cannot tell," answered Gray, looking down on the face of the sleeping child. "Yet the sins of his father and his mother must be visited upon him, the Bible says, 'to the third and fourth generation.'"

"Why should we suffer for our fathers' sins?" she exclaimed resentfully. "It's unjust. I don't believe we are punished even for our own. Why are you so hard and stern?" she asked, looking up at him inquiringly. "You're very young, as young as I am."

"I'm not too young to have a conscience, to know right from wrong." He spoke with the resentment youth always has against the charge which cannot be denied.

"To know right from wrong! To be sure? I often cannot tell. I do not think Faith knew."

"How did she come to fall?"

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"You know as well as I. You're a man. You're human, you have seen something of life. Judge for yourself."

She spoke scornfully and looked at Gray with disdainful eyes. She flung down a challenge appealing to instincts that lay quiescent in his nature. For a moment he did not answer; acutely aware of her antagonism. Strangely enough, for the first time he realized that he was contending with one worthy of his steel, not against abstract wrong, but against a woman, and it made an appeal to the dormant spirit of chivalry in his soul.

"I do not want to judge. Surely you can tell me the simple facts about Faith."

He was impatient of her attitude, but his tone became more gentle, and Alice resented the change. It did not alter her feeling, but she was willing to adapt herself to his attitude. Lowering her own voice, she replied, letting a certain silkiness creep into her tone:

"And if I knew, do you think I would tell? The truth is, I don't. Faith has suffered enough without the humiliation of my curiosity." Then again, with ominous softness, she asked, "Why don't you ask her about it yourself?"

At this Gray flushed. Did this girl imagine he, a clergyman, had yielded to vulgar curiosity? She stood, looking at him, her own face throbbing with color, her very attitude a criticism of his presence. He realized suddenly, with a curious weakening of his knees, that Alice Hale was as clever as well as a beautiful woman. The consciousness of this strengthened his determination to justify himself.

"No, I would not ask her. She is very young. I am not curious, but I must reach her conscience. I can't under-

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stand how a girl, brought up as Faith was, could have forgotten the precepts of the church and brought a child of sin into the world. She must have shut her eyes to the light of truth and her ears to the whispers of her own conscience."

"Perhaps," Alice said, and, walking over to the easel, she laid her brushes down and rubbed her hands on a paint-rag by the easel. "And is it so hard for you to imagine one doing just that?" she asked. "I wonder how and where you have lived to remain so blind to the power of the temptations that move men and women. Perhaps Faith did hear the whispers of the church, perhaps she did see the truth. Is there nothing stronger, no passion, no desire?"

Gray's eyes flashed. "One must resist desire. God's laws are just laws. You cannot take away the penalty of sin. Punishment must follow the breaking of divine commandments; to shield Faith from the penalty of her sin is another sin."

"You are, as I thought," said Alice, "hard and stern; you have come to manhood with the love of God in your heart, but none for your neighbor."

"I am not hard and stern," the minister replied, "and I am weary of the accusation. You do not understand a man's passion for perfection, his love of righteousness for righteousness' sake. The Kingdom of God has always been in the keeping of a chosen band. That is God's church. The martyrs died for it. I am one of its ministers."

In spite of herself Alice was impressed by the earnestness and the eloquence of this man and, blaming herself for her weakness, she spoke almost flippantly. "The only martyr that I ever knew died for love of Art, he was

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a young student from Provence. I wonder would you do as much for love of God."

"I cannot tell," he answered. "I hope I would."

For a moment there was silence, broken by Gray. "But you cannot understand either me or Faith. You have not sinned — like her."

It was more a question than a statement, and he realized his mistake almost before the words had left his lips. It was as if he had carelessly lowered his guard and opened himself to a certain deadly thrust. He waited for it with a tightening of his breath. Why had he given this girl such an opening? Whatever she said now, he had only himself to blame.

She was not looking at him. "No," she said, "I have not sinned like Faith, but I can imagine that it might have been possible — once upon a time. As for you —" she paused, suddenly looking up at him.

He interrupted hastily. "You think me —" Then he paused, and finished, lamely, "blind?"

"Yes, I think you blind and deaf, and with all your senses dwarfed by repression and lack of use." She turned away, and, walking to the window, asked, "Did you hear the thrush singing in your garden early this morning?"

"No, I did not hear it."

"You see, your ears are deaf to melody. Perhaps your parrot drowned the song." She turned and took a red rose from the vase behind her. "Look at this flower," she demanded, "how beautiful it is, and yet you cannot really see it. Tell me what is the color of this rose?" She asked this holding it in front of the preacher's eyes.

"Why, red, of course," he answered confidently, and as if he wished to humor her.

"'T is crimson," she declared pityingly. "How blind

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you are! Now, smell of it, and feel its petals, they are cool and soft as velvet."

Gray took the rose and inhaled its perfume. In some strange way it reached his senses as nothing else had done. It was almost with a struggle that he gave it back to Alice, and, the charm being broken, he said resentfully:

"I did not come here this morning to smell and feel a rose."

All this time he had followed her leadings, not as from compulsion, but rather as accepting a challenge to his courage, his manhood, and his fairness. She now turned to the table, replaced the rose in its vase, and, taking in her fingers a piece of the golden-fleshed apple, she held it before his lips.

"Eat," she whispered, almost childishly.

"Are you playing a game?" Gray exclaimed, taking her wrist in his hand to push away the fruit.

"No, 't is not a game. Eat it. Are you afraid? I'm not Eve, and this is not a garden."

"Afraid! Why are you so foolish?"

"Eat it, then," she insisted, freeing her hand and lifting the apple to his lips, her fingers touching his cheek.

"No, it is no game. I'm very much in earnest; I'm trying to show you that you've starved your senses almost to death."

"At least my mind is clear," declared Gray.

"And mine, too, although you question it," was the quick response. All this time Alice had spoken in low tones, with her eyes strangely fixed on those of the preacher. She raised her voice as she said, "I tell you, we have bodies as well as souls. I knew a poet once who wrote —

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“Which one of us, remembering his sins,
Can say where body ends, and soul begins.”

“Paul says, ‘For the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.’ One or the other must be master.”

“But neither need be a slave,” declared Alice quickly. “And what do you know of this war?” She asked this question in the same tone in which he had said, “You have not sinned — like her”, but she touched him, and his face flushed, and he spoke with a voice full of feeling:

“I am God’s shepherd, too inexperienced for my task, but faithful, and I watch my flock. Like Paul, whom you despise, ‘I keep under my body and bring it into subjection, lest that, by any means, when I have preached to others I myself should be a castaway.’”

Again Alice was impressed by the earnestness of this man, and she gave a grudging respect to his honesty. “Do you preach like that?” she asked, with a little catch in her breath. “Sometime I’ll go to church and hear you.” She said this half seriously and half mockingly, then turned suddenly to a little statue of Apollo on a table behind her. “What do you think of it?” she asked. “Of course it’s only plaster, which is all I can afford.” Then, lifting her eyes from the statue, she looked at Gray critically, with the eyes of an artist. “You’d make a good Apollo, too, but for your clumsy clothes. If you went into the student quarter where I spent my year, they’d be after you to pose for them.”

“Pose for them!” he exclaimed.

Apparently not noticing his indignation, she turned to the nude statue of a Greek dancing girl and calmly asked him, “What do you think of this?”

It was a beautiful figure; there was in it the very spirit

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of springtime, the joy of life. She watched Gray curiously as his eyes rested doubtfully on the lithe form, and he declared doubtfully, "The arms are beautiful."

At this she laughed aloud, merrily, almost scornfully. "But why the arms alone?" she asked. "Look at her breast and body. See the roundness of her thighs, the supple limbs and slender feet." She touched the statue caressingly with her artist fingers. "Look, I say. Don't be afraid; can't you see that the whole body is beautiful and good to look upon?"

"I am not sure we should look upon it," he replied, "and I did not come here this morning for a lesson in pagan art."

"I mean more than that," she said, her voice again becoming low and monotonous. "You say, 'these arms are beautiful.' Yet they are cold and colorless. They lack life and love." She spoke more slowly, and with something of the tone and manner of a mesmerist. Then she lifted her hands high above her head, and her loose sleeves fell to her shoulders. "Look at my arms, they are not so beautiful as hers, but — they are warm."

The shocked expression in Gray's eyes checked her speech but for a moment.

"You need n't be afraid. We don't love each other. But Faith loved . . . and the man . . . loved." She reached forward, took his hand and placed his unresisting fingers on her arm, watching him with half-closed eyes and head thrown back.

Gray's heart was pounding. Some strange giant emotion reached down and swept him upon its wings from off the solid earth. He was only conscious of the smoothness and warmth of her arm; of the perfume of her hair; of her whole self, youthful, and sweet and tempting.

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His hands crept slowly to her yielding shoulders, he swept her soft body suddenly into his arms and, groping, found her lips. They clung together for an instant, then Alice broke away. She walked slowly to the door, lifting her hands to replace a lock of hair which had been loosened in the struggle, her eyes intently fixed on Gray's face, a smile half triumph, half wonder, on her own.

The emotion that had mastered Gray disappeared as suddenly as it had come. This girl was laughing at him; she had led him on to make mock of his ideals.

"You Jezebel!" he cried, furious with anger. "You Scarlet Woman!"

Alice paused for a moment, her voice trembling a little as she replied, "Scarlet, am I? And well I may be to be kissed like that. I'll send Faith to you now."

Left alone, Gray vainly tried to regain his composure. He took his handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed his lips, as if he would wipe a stain away. He seated himself in the chair before the easel and covered his face with his hands. The girl had played a game with him, and won it. She had confounded his ideals, and razed his temple of self-conceit to the ground. He wondered at his passion. He was ashamed almost to nausea of his weakness. With these confused thoughts weltering through the maze of his emotions, he was still conscious of the burning ardor of their kiss, with its sweet savor of the earth. Was it thus that Faith's sin had begun? And if one kiss from a beautiful woman meant so much . . . his mind could not continue. So mastered was he by his emotions that he did not hear Faith enter, nor see her as she stood looking wonderingly at him. When at last he became conscious of her presence, he rose suddenly and saw her standing before him.

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"She sent you to me?" He asked this, his voice hoarse with anger, and pointed to the doorway.

"Yes," answered Faith. "What's Alice said to you?"

"You don't know?" he asked, as if he doubted her word. Faith shook her head, and he came close to her, looking intently into her eyes. They were very frightened eyes, the pupils dilated with excitement, and her cheeks pale and drawn. As he looked at her, he forgot his hatred of Alice, his own shame and failure, his duty as a clergyman and the mandates of the church. The appeal reached his heart, and a great pity filled his breast, an emotion as strong as the passion that had dominated him. He was no longer a clergyman, but just a man. He said, "Poor little girl," and took the trembling hands in his own.

"Please be kind to me," she begged, a big tear running down her cheek and splashing on their clasped hands. It was an appeal most eloquent.

He looked at it and his own eyes were moist as he answered, "I will be kind to you."

"It's been so dreadful hard, so awful lonely," she whispered.

"Poor little girl," he said again, for other words would not come, and there was a lump in his throat which almost stopped his utterance.

"I'm so sorry for it all," she said.

"You're sorry, are you!" he exclaimed, his voice becoming strong and vibrant. "Well, that's enough for me. It was enough for Christ. If you're sorry, back you come into the church, and no one shall stop you."

As Gray said this, there came a great joy in his heart, a feeling of emancipation and of exaltation. It was as if he had broken through the high walls that had all his life shut him in.

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"Of course, father is against me. You know the reason why?" she asked.

"Yes, I know. Would n't it be better for you to tell? Your father says that he'll forgive you if you do."

"I cannot tell."

"No one shall make you, then," he declared firmly. "But can't you tell me why? Your lover should atone for the wrong which he has done you."

"By marrying me against his will? He would despise me. Morning, noon, and night we must be together."

"Think of your child," insisted Gray. "He has no name. This wicked man is unpunished and unrecognized."

"He's not a wicked man. It is n't cowardice that keeps him silent."

"You're too generous. His love is not like yours."

"No, it was n't love," she declared regretfully. "He only — wanted me. Yet I think his heart is softening, and sometime he'll come to love me. Till then — why, I can wait."

"Is love like that?" asked Gray wonderingly.

"My love is just like that," answered Faith.

"Passing the love of woman," he said, looking at the face before him in its Madonna-like beauty.

"I worship the very walls of the old white meeting-house," she said, her lips trembling with emotion. "It would break my heart to be expelled."

"Heart-break, or heart-whole, I thought an hour ago you should be cast out. I have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. I say that you shall stay with us."

CHAPTER IX

FAITH watched the departure of the minister with wondering eyes. He had been angry when she came to him — apparently at Alice; he had been almost incoherent, and had pointed at the door, unable to complete a sentence. Regaining control of himself, he had talked more calmly, and ended by being kind. But how strangely he had finished. What had Alice said to him?

Faith first looked for her in the house, and in the garden. Then she climbed on to the stone wall at the rear, and caught a glimpse of a gray blouse under the willows by the river. Here were some stepping-stones around which the brown waters surged, making a beautiful picture. Faith hurried across the meadow, and found Alice seated on the bank, one knee clasped in her fingers. Her cheeks were red, and she did not turn at Faith's approach.

"Oh, Alice! He was so good to me. He was wonderful. What did you say to him?" There was no reply, nor to a repetition of the question, until Faith had taken her by the shoulder, with, "Alice, what is the matter with you?"

Faith sat down on the grassy bank and waited in silence. Alice did not turn her head or answer, but gazed steadfastly into the flowing water. After a few minutes Faith spoke again, timidly.

"Please tell me what the minister said."

When Alice spoke, it was in a tone of curious softness and with an enigmatic inflection in her voice. "I can't tell you—that is, not now. It does n't matter, anyway . . ."

"What do you think he meant when he said, 'I have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'?"

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"I don't know," answered Alice. Then, speaking more vigorously, "Yes, I *do* know. Sometime perhaps I'll tell you." She paused and hesitated for a moment. "Faith," she said, "do you mind if I stay down here alone for a few minutes? I want to think."

"Alice!" cried Faith, "something has happened. What is it? Your eyes are bright — just as they are when you are angry, and your cheeks are scarlet."

"I believe they are *scarlet*," Alice answered; "yes, that is the word for them." Then, speaking with decision: "I can't tell you anything now, you'll have to trust me for a little while. I did the best I could for you."

"I know you did," Faith answered, "and I'll be grateful to you forever." She bent shyly and kissed Alice. "My!" she exclaimed, "your cheeks are hot! What could the minister have said? You must have had an awful time with him."

She ran back to the house, and Alice sat a long while by the river, her eyes occasionally wandering to the chimneys of the parsonage rising above the trees.

In spite of her knowledge of life and her liberal views of how others might live, she had been an exacting mistress of her own action. She had realized when she went to Paris how easy it was for a girl to be led by those around her to a careless standard of living. She had driven with a tight rein, because she knew the fire in her own blood.

The experience of the morning was new to her. Playing a game for the sake of another, she realized that she liked the game itself. She was honest with herself, and did not deny that the embrace and kiss had awakened something which she wished had continued to sleep. This was more than she had bargained for. She sat by the river for a long

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time, and when she went back to the house she had made up her mind that, having won the Reverend John Gray to kindness for Faith, she would henceforth let him severely alone.

So confused were Gray's thoughts that he hardly knew how he had found his way back to his study. When he came to himself, he was seated in his armchair, his handkerchief in his hand, with which he was mechanically wiping his lips. He first threw the handkerchief in the fire, then, striding around the room, tried to get his mental bearings. His first thought was that he must resign his pastorate. He had been unfaithful to his high calling. He would quietly slip away, leaving his letter of resignation on the table.

After a while he sat down at his desk, and arraigned himself before his conscience as judge. He could not deny that he had forgotten his "high calling," that he had given way to a purely physical impulse. In defense, he claimed the purity of his motive, the seductiveness of the temptation, the deliberate plan for his downfall. How insinuatingly she had spoken of the thrush, the apple, the rose, and the statue.

"Which one of us, remembering his sins,
Can say where body ends, and soul begins?"

There was certainly more than soul in that embrace and kiss. For a moment his thought lingered on the sweetness of her lips, the fragrance of her hair, the rapture of her soft body. Then he fell on his knees and prayed, as did Saint Anthony in the desert. When he rose, he had put all earthly thoughts from his mind. He saw clearly that to give up his pastorate would be to acknowledge defeat and confess to this woman that she was triumphant. It would

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be the victory of evil. He would not bow to it. He would go on with his work. He was like a young knight who had been overthrown in his first encounter, and was resolved to efface his defeat by worthy and noble deeds.

So occupied was he with his plans that when Linda knocked at his door, he told her he did not care for any dinner.

"Don't want no dinner!" exclaimed Linda. "Be you sick?"

"No," replied Gray, "I am neither sick nor hungry." And Linda returned to her work greatly wondering.

It was mid-afternoon; the preacher had reached a state of calm and was quite master of himself, when there came a ring at the door. Linda was in the midst of her ironing, so Gray went himself and found a little man on the step. He was clad in a rusty suit of black, so rusty that it had acquired a shade of green. He wore no overcoat, although the air was cool. Strangest of all was a silk hat which, from frequent brushing, had lost its nap and had left but little more than the frame. The visitor awkwardly removed what was evidently his ceremonial hat, and said:

"Good-morning, Brother Gray. I am Robert Warner, the pastor of the Baptist Church. I wish to extend the right hand of fellowship to you."

Gray grasped the extended palm, which was hard and horny. He had heard from Harding of the vicissitudes of the elderly shepherd of the Baptist fold in Wesley, and of his brave struggle to eke out a too scanty salary by tilling a small farm on the outskirts of the village.

"You are very welcome," Gray declared, drawing the little man into the study and leading him to the armchair, into which he sank with a sigh of content.

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After a short silence, Mr. Warner cleared his throat and said hesitatingly, "I don't s'pose there's much I can do to help you, but I wanted to show my good feeling, and I thought I might give you some information, if nothing else, seeing we're to work in the same vineyard where I've labored thirty year."

His face was square and deeply lined, his hair was white, and his black brows were so thick that they almost hid his faded eyes, but as he spoke he smiled, and there came over his rugged features an expression of kindness and good-will that transformed their ugliness.

"I shall not hesitate to call on you," replied Gray, "and you must make use of me all you can. I shall have some new books in a few days, and you must borrow them whenever you like."

At this Mr. Warner's face lit up again. "I've not been able to buy a new book for a long time, though I do take the *Baptist Herald*, which tells me of some of the books which have been printed. I'll be very careful of all you lend me."

In spite of both their efforts, conversation was difficult, and the old man rose at last and said, rather doubtfully, "I s'pose you would n't care to take a little ride with me. I'm going to the farm to bring home some pumpkins; perhaps you'd like some yourself, if you're fond of pumpkin pie. They taste good now, though they get rather tiresome 'long about February."

Gray was glad to escape from himself and from the room where he had wrestled with Satan, and he accepted readily. He glanced at his overcoat on the wall, but did not put it on, fearing the contrast of his own comfortable garment with the Baptist minister's thin coat. He spoke to Linda, telling her he would be back for supper, and,

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following Mr. Warner down the path, found the equipage in front of his gate. The "buggy" was so old that no hint of varnish remained, and there were few vestiges of paint left. The top had cracks and fissures in the leather, and the cloth of the cushion was greener than the owner's coat. Little wisps of straw protruding through the holes were evidence that the luxury of curled hair had always been denied. An old gray mare was dozing between the shafts, one of which had been broken and wound with tarred rope. Mr. Warner woke his weary steed, and, taking her by the bridle, swung her well into the road, so that Gray could step in easily. He followed, took up the patched reins, said, "Huddup, Daisy," and they were off. The bolts and springs rattled, and Gray looked with horror at the wheels, which revolved in different orbits and threatened to desert their burden altogether.

For a little while they jogged on in silence, interrupted only by an occasional "Huddup" and an intermittent jerking of the reins when Daisy seemed inclined to stop and bend her knees in prayer. The callous places on her knees were evidence of frequent devotions of this kind. They climbed the hill, passed the French Place and the sawmill, rattled over the wooden bridge, and reached the open country beyond. Here the old man became more loquacious, and Gray was not forced to do much more than answer in monosyllables.

"How large a congregation did you have last Sunday?" inquired Warner.

"I'm sure I don't know."

"That's strange. I always count mine when they stand up to sing the last hymn. Then they're all in, and none of them have slipped out to get their teams to the door for the women-folks. Of course the first-off stands less chance

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of getting the dust from the others. They tell me you had nigh a hundred. Of course some were from my church. It's natural for them to want to hear a new man's first sermon. I s'pose they'll be back next Sunday."

"Of course," said Gray.

"I only had nineteen," continued Mr. Warner. "That's low-water mark for me on a fine day. When I first came to Wesley, thirty year ago, I averaged close to forty. Sometimes I'm afraid I've mistaken my calling, though it seemed clear enough at the time." As the old man said this, he looked out toward the hills wistfully. "What was the collection?"

"I don't know."

"You would if you had a lot of unpaid bills," declared the old man. "They tell me you've got money of your own. I'm glad of that. Preaching from the text 'A laborer is worthy of his hire' is sometimes necessary, but it's always unpleasant both for the congregation and the minister."

There was a faint smile on Warner's face which showed he had not quite lost his sense of humor, and Gray smiled back at him and tried to laugh.

"We only got ninety-five cents. Pity some one did n't put in a ten-cent piece instead of a five and make it up to a dollar. My salary's s'posed to be the same as yours, but I don't get half of it. Last year there was less than three hundred dollars, real money. I'm not sure whether I came out ahead or behind on the donations — probably a little behind. I'd starve to death if it was n't for my farm."

"Yes," replied Gray. "I suppose that helps you a good deal, but a clergyman ought to be able to give all his time and attention to his church."

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"I s'pose he ought," agreed Warner, "and perhaps he ought to make money farming. I raise a few vegetables, some grain and corn, and cut enough hay to feed Daisy and a cow through the winter. I don't have any success in raising pigs, and my hens don't seem much fonder of laying eggs than my congregation do of putting money in the plate. Not that I mean to find fault with my folks, for they're all poor and have n't much to give, except Mr. Hobbs who runs the sawmill, and he don't come very regular. I'm about as much of a success farming as preaching. You're a young man, Brother Gray, and I hope you'll never wake up to the fact that you're a failure. I'm not lazy, and I've always tried to do my best, God knows that."

As the old man said this, he squared his shoulders and looked up at Gray appealingly, who said a word or two of comfort and good cheer, and occupied his mind in wondering how he could help the poor man by his side, determined that the load of poverty should be taken from the patient back. He saw he must be careful, for Warner's next words were:

"I hope you don't mind my talking so freely with you, and you must n't think I want you to help me. I'll find a way out, with the help of the Lord. I s'pose it keeps me humble, being dunned by Crocker. I owe him nigh thirty dollars. I'd make both ends meet, too, if it was n't for the doctor's bills. I once had a lot of money. An aunt of mine left me more'n three hundred dollars. I ought to have put it in the savings bank, but instead I bought a hundred shares of mining stock — the Yellow Queen, 't was called. They promised to give me ten per cent, and it paid one dividend and nothing more. I tried to sell it last year, but they told me 't was worth nothing and to use

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the certificates to paper my parlor. It makes me feel sick when I think what I could do with that three hundred dollars now."

"It's too bad," declared Gray, "and the sharks that took your money should be put in prison."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Warner, "and I know where I ought to be put for doing such a crazy thing. I'm troubled most about my wife. Her rheumatism's dreadful bad. The doctor says if she had more nourishing food, he could help her. I can't buy it and the ravens don't provide it, like they did for Elijah. She's a 'shut-in' — has n't been to church for 'most a year. You see, Mary was awful pretty, and she don't like to have folks see her back now. She still does the easy part of the housework, for she's pure grit, and when I get to feeling bad, she always has the right word for me. God was surely kind when he sent Mary to me."

As he said this, the old man's cheek flushed, his eyes grew bright, and Gray looked at him almost with reverence. Here was something holy, the love of a good man for the woman who had trodden the hard path of life by his side.

"Mary makes up for everything," the old man declared.

"Yes," said Gray, "God has been kind to you. I'm sure He will help you out of your troubles. Remember. 'I have not seen the righteous forsaken.'"

"'Nor his seed begging bread,' " chimed in the old man.

They turned off the main road, where it branched to the left, and, climbing over a hill fringed with pine and spruce, they descended into a little valley. Here stood a farmhouse of colonial architecture. Its white paint had turned a rusty gray and the green blinds were blackened by

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exposure to the elements. Patches of yellow lichens clung to them and followed the line of the old eaves spout. The ancient shingles were warped and mossy. A fire had destroyed the ell, and a tangle of weeds and vines tried in vain to hide the melancholy ruins. Here children had been born, had laughed and played, had grown to manhood, but their children had not cared to restore the fallen roof-tree. There are few sights sadder than a farmhouse left blackened by the flames.

The old man put a half-dozen pumpkins in the back of the carriage, and they started on the return journey. On the way home Mr. Warner continued to talk, his speech coming like the steady flow of waters long restrained. He was one of those unfortunates foreordained to failure. He had always waged an unsuccessful battle against the world, however victorious he might have been over the flesh and the devil. He had fitted himself for college by evening study, and passed a year inside the classic walls. Then his money had given out and his health as well. Painfully accumulating another little store, he had gone directly to the theological school. Here he found little opportunity to eke out his dwindling cash by manual labor, and he had lived an entire winter on bread, milk, and potatoes. All this time he had been sustained by the belief that he had been divinely called to be a minister of Christ, and the hope that he would win multitudes to the faith he preached. He was doomed to disappointment, for he had no gifts of oratory nor could he express the fire and enthusiasm that warmed his own heart. Yet, laboring under these defects, he had kept his faith in God, his love for man. Bent with years, horny-handed with toil, his smile still held the light of youth's fervor. As he watched and listened to the Baptist minister, Gray's

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heart warmed toward the old man, and he determined to help him.

When they came to the main road again, Mr. Warner pointed with his whip to a snug little farm, well tilled, and still showing signs of green. "There's where Deacon Harding lives."

"Would it put you out too much to let me stop and see him for a few minutes?" asked Gray.

"'T would n't put me out the least bit," replied Warner. "I've nothing particular to do, and Daisy's quite willing to wait, too."

The little house was as white as paint could make it, and the blinds as green as the grass around it. In answer to Gray's knock, the "hired girl" came to the door, told him the Deacon was in the barn and ushered him into the little sitting-room.

As Gray sat in the armchair by the window, on the wall in front of him was a picture, its face to the wall. The preacher had no doubt of the tragedy that it figured, but he could not resist the temptation of examining it. It was a crayon portrait of Faith, and even the crude skill of the artist gave some reflection of her beauty. It was the first time that Gray had ever seen bitterness of spirit expressed in this way, and he shook his head as he thought of what it must mean to the stern old Deacon. He resumed his seat at the sound of approaching footsteps, and, learning from the hired girl that the Deacon was not to be found, had "probably gone to the blacksmith's," the minister took his departure.

When they came to the village, Mr. Warner began to speak of those who lived in it. He pointed out the house of Mr. Hobbs, the financial pillar of the Baptist Church, and of others of his flock. To this Gray listened listlessly,

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but more intently when the members of his own church were described. He learned of Deacon Harding's goodness and sternness; that Elder Belcher was warm-hearted and generous, but too easy-going to be of much assistance. At Elder Crocker, the old man shook his head, and said he was afraid he did n't appreciate Asa. He had nothing but good to say of David French. He told how, after his father's death, he had given up college and taken charge of the school, so he could care for his mother. Brother Warner hesitated a little when he came to Fred Miller, and asked:

"Are you sure you could n't have kept him in the fold?"

"I could not," replied Gray shortly, his mind going back to Miller's scornful words. "He said he did not belong with us; he took himself away."

"Too bad, was n't it?" said Warner; and then continued: "Abby Green has a spiteful tongue, and she ought to correct publicly a slander that she has circulated all over the village. I can't help feeling sorry for Abby, though. They tell me her young man went back on her and spoiled her life. Then her brother died and she's had to support his daughter, Maud. What do you intend to do with Faith?"

This last question came very abruptly, and Gray was not pleased to know how freely the action of the "Board" had been discussed in the village; but the old man was so unconscious of any impertinence that the preacher did not take offense.

"We shall keep Faith Harding in the church, when she makes her confession."

"I'm glad of that. Strange that Nature and Religion are so ag'in' each other. Girls and boys are just the same,

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yet we take back the prodigal sons who have enjoyed themselves with the harlots and we kill the fatted calf for them, but the prodigal daughters we either send away or we look at them with scorn the rest of their days. It is n't fair, is it?"

To this question Gray made no reply. It brought back to him Alice Hale's face, so full of scorn and protest.

"I'm glad you're keeping Jude. Poor Jude! Everybody loves him, and he'd give his right hand to any one who needed it. He was a real hero nursing Bateese through the smallpox. I'm afraid, though, he'll never give up drink. You'll have to bear with him. It's in the blood."

"He'll have to give up drink if he stays in my church," declared Gray decisively. "I'll be patient with him and help him all I can, but if he remains a drunkard, he'll have to go."

They had now reached the little square in front of the Methodist Church, and Warner suddenly drew rein. He pointed to an unsightly building opposite, flanked on one side by the hotel. "Then you'll have to do away with that. The lower floor's vacant. The second story's occupied by the Daniel Webster Club. That's where Jude gets his liquor and where he goes every Saturday night. More than that, you'll have to drive Pasco Tripp away or convert him. He's the president of the club and the leader of all the wickedness in the village of Wesley. I s'pose Wesley's like every other place: the good and the bad are everywhere, but you'll have to travel some distance to find a man as bad as Pasco."

Until this moment the old man had spoken calmly and had been kind and generous with every one, even Asa. But now he spoke almost fiercely, and with resentment

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startling in its intensity. "Do you s'pose folks are ever possessed with devils, like they were in Bible times? If so, Pasco Tripp has them. He's the only man in whom I can't find some redeeming quality. He takes pleasure in leading young fellows into sin, and he's got a lot of girls into trouble. Seems as if they can't resist him, any more'n a rabbit can resist a snake. My heart is sick when I think of all he's sent on the road to perdition. He comes to church Sunday morning on purpose to tell his wicked stories before the service and to ridicule the sermon afterwards."

"Every time my eye catches his, I lose the witness of the spirit and the fervor goes out of my heart," declared Gray.

"Well, brother," continued the old man, "convert Pasco and drive the Webster Club out of Wesley and you'll get your halo if you die the next day."

"Conversion's in the hands of the Lord, but I promise you I'll drive the Webster Club out of the village or go myself. If Gideon with three hundred men could overcome the Midianites, I can certainly do this."

He spoke with such determination that Mr. Warner held out his twisted fingers and shook the young man's hand.

"And you'll have my prayers morning, noon, and night."

Down the hill jogged Daisy, stopped in front of the parsonage, and Gray entered it, a huge pumpkin in each hand and the weight of a strong purpose in his heart. The Midianites must be put to flight. He was the Gideon who must win the victory.

CHAPTER X

THE next morning Gray spent in his study, working on his sermon. When he entered the room, he found the same lean and hungry cat on the sill, with Cæsar swearing at the unwelcome visitor, who did not retreat until the preacher went to the window. He wrote until the clock struck twelve, and after dinner went through the roll of church members on his desk. Almost the first duty of a new minister in the Methodist Church is to make the calls on his congregation. He had gone over this matter carefully with Elder Crocker, who had told him what the order of precedence should be. He had visited Elder Crocker, Mrs. French, and Deacon Harding. The only official left was Elder Belcher, right at his elbow. Next on his list was Mrs. Lawton, followed by Abigail Green. His call on Faith Harding he knew was an event in his life. Although he did not think of it in the same words that Alice Hale had used, he realized that he had been partly cured of a mental astigmatism. He was determined that Faith should be reinstated.

It was of Alice Hale that he thought — Alice Hale, an infidel, but generous, sympathetic, courageous, and warm-hearted. How completely she had triumphed over him! He thought of her with mingled emotions of dislike and admiration.

Pasco Tripp was almost as difficult a question. Could he hope to convince and convert so hardened a sinner? At least he must try. His task was complicated by the strong aversion he had taken to this man. Again and again he wrestled in prayer, that there might come into

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his own heart the spirit of that love which the Bible commanded must be given even to our enemies. Was Alice also an enemy? He was not sure where to place her.

He was determined that the Daniel Webster Club must be closed. How could he do it? Every one in the village knew it contained liquor, but it had been raided twice and nothing had been discovered. Its doors were open only after a secret countersign, and he could not think of any way he could obtain access short of actual violence, at which he hesitated.

One problem he had solved in his own mind, and that was how he might lift the burden of debt off of poor old Mr. Warner's bent shoulders. Concerning this he wished to obtain some information from Elder French, and he planned to see him after the session of the school.

When Gray opened Elder Belcher's gate, the church clock was striking three; the real time was 3.15, and the unreliable timepiece had wandered more than ever from the path of rectitude. In the Belcher yard, Mrs. Belcher, clad in a calico dress and wearing a gingham sun-bonnet, was raking up the leaves. A little woman with bright, beady eyes, something of a vixen, she would not give up the hope of inciting her ponderous husband to action. Her larger, if not her better, half was waiting patiently, seated on the back steps, prepared to burn the leaves after they were all gathered. Elijah considered this to be his proper share of the work, although it meant not much more than the scratching of a match. He greeted the preacher cordially, but Mrs. Belcher was not so sympathetic, for she was chagrined to be discovered at her task and so plainly clad. The Elder took Gray into the sitting-room, and a little later Mrs. Belcher reappeared, having changed her dress. She

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brought with her Molly, the latest branch on the Belcher family tree. Molly was a plump little maiden, "going on six," as she told the preacher, although her fifth birthday was only just past. She gave her hand to her visitor, and followed it with her lips, rather to the embarrassment of the bashful preacher; and a little later, he found her on his knee, quite contentedly playing with his watch-chain. So cloistered had Gray's life been that this was actually the first time he had ever held a child in his arms, and there came into his heart, close to which Molly's yellow head rested, a warmth which it had never felt before.

The conversation, beginning with the business of the church, soon veered to more worldly things, and Mrs. Belcher gave the clergyman some pungent facts, as a rule not flattering, concerning the ladies resident in the village of Wesley. These were not particularly interesting to Gray, nor was Elijah pleased, and he frequently qualified his wife's statements with more generous words. All in all, it was not a pleasant interview, and Gray, pleading the necessity for making other calls, soon took his leave. The last words came from Molly, who declared her intention of going over to see him. She also gave him her red lips again for him to kiss. On the way out he passed "Tug," the other member of the Belcher family, a rugged youth of twelve years, who met the minister with reluctance and was plainly relieved at his departure.

When the preacher crossed the street and rang the bell of Mrs. Lawton's little house, he found this lady prepared and prettily gowned, for she had caught sight of the preacher going into the Belcher's yard and guessed her turn would come next. Mrs. Lawton was fair, but neither "fat" nor "forty," although there was a round-

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ness in her figure that made the future threatening. Abby Green declared "Mis' Lawton was thirty-two," and Abby's accounting of another lady's age could be depended on as not being flattering. "Mis' Lawton" put a soft hand into Gray's palm, and let it linger until he dropped it. She had a pretty parlor, for the defunct Mr. Lawton had been a "good provider," the highest distinction possible to be gained by a Wesley husband. He now, in his black-walnut frame, looked down from the wall on his blushing widow and her caller. Whether caricatured by artist or photographer, he had a melancholy expression of having stolen a sheep or of being detected kissing his neighbor's wife. But, barring the portrait, Mrs. Lawton had seen to it that there should be nothing unsightly in the room. Whether justly or not, she had been accused of a willingness to substitute a real man for the effigy of the one which hung on the wall. She had spent a year with a married sister who lived at "The Falls," — a town of ten thousand inhabitants, — and her views of life had been broadened. She had a habit of speaking the truth frankly, but not disagreeably, and she left her friends' reputations intact. She was aware of the fact that she could make almost any man happy, and there were few unattached men in the village of Wesley that had not tried to capture her. It was even said that Elder Crocker had succumbed to the double attraction of her beauty and her bank account.

The only upright piano in the village was decorated with a scarf embroidered with blue forget-me-nots, the cretonne curtains were blue — indeed, the cerulean hue pervaded the room and toned pleasantly with Mrs. Lawton's azure eyes and pink cheeks. There was a vase of flowers, hastily gathered from the little garden and

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placed on the table at the moment that Gray was ringing the bell. Having assigned the preacher a very comfortable armchair, the widow perched herself on the most becoming one, and, having exhausted the weather, conversation naturally gravitated to the affairs of the church. Mrs. Lawton confessed to past spiritual coldness and indifference, declared her purpose to live a better life, and offered her services in any direction which Gray might choose. She told how her soul had been quickened by the sermon on Gideon, and said that nothing could keep her from regular attendance at the Sunday service.

The preacher did not find it necessary to speak except at long intervals, for the widow rippled on like the brook. Finding himself rather oppressed by the warmth of his reception and the friendly glances which were sent to him, Gray was about to take his departure, but his hostess pressed him to remain, as she had a request to make.

"Of course you know that a woman who has lost her protector and is living alone is often assailed by malicious tongues, no matter how carefully she may live."

Gray expressed his regret that Mrs. Lawton should have been troubled in this way, and hoped that the public retraction of the next Sunday would remove the least breath against her.

"But I don't want anything said about me," declared the widow. "It's dreadful, and I'll feel like sinkin' through the floor. What Abby says about any one won't hurt them. Can't you stop it? Let Abby off, to please me."

"It is very good of you," declared Gray warmly, "it is very generous. I understand exactly how you feel. I am sorry to say, however, that the public confession must be made, for Miss Green's own sake. The Board has

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acted, and I cannot conscientiously ask them to change their vote."

"Well," said Mrs. Lawton, "if you must, you must, and you'll understand why I shan't be at church next Sunday morning."

When Mr. Gray took his departure, the widow gave him her soft hand again, and he pressed it with no feeling of gallantry, but a thorough appreciation of Mrs. Lawton's good-heartedness. He had no intention of holding it longer than necessary, but he felt uncomfortable when he turned to see Alice Hale across the street just entering her gate. He imagined there was a smile of amusement on her face, and it angered more than it embarrassed him. Why should she be passing at just that moment? Must he always appear at a disadvantage before her?

Abby Green and her niece, Maud, were not like the foolish virgins in the parable, who, waiting the coming of their lord, lacked oil in their lamps and were lost in slumber. Abby, that faithful sentinel, peering through the blinds, saw Gray, ceremonially clad, call on Elder Belcher. It was evident that he would give the afternoon to visiting his congregation. They had expected he would stay longer, but when he closed the Belchers' gate and crossed the street directly toward their own, they were not quite prepared.

"Lordy massy!" cried Abby, from her post at the window, to Maud who was decorating herself in the bedroom. "The parson's coming. — No, he ain't," she continued, with a sigh of relief.

"Watch him, Auntie," commanded Maud. "Where's he going next?"

"He's gone into Mis' Lawton's," answered Abby, "an' I'd like to know why he passed us by for her. There's

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two of us here an' I was a member of the church afore she was born."

"It ain't right," declared Maud, emerging from the bedroom, "but it'll give you time to get into your cashmere dress. Hurry up, so I can fasten you up."

Maud took her station at the window; Abby, who was lightly clad in a white skirt and a knitted sacque, retired to the bedroom for a moment and came out with the cashmere gown hanging from her shoulders.

"Why did you ever have all these buttons put on the back?" asked Maud fretfully.

"T was the style when I got it," explained Abby.

"How long ago," inquired Maud, — "about thirty years?"

"Yes," replied Abby, "when you was 'bout five years old."

"That's a lie," snapped Maud. "I'm only twenty-six."

"Well," continued Abby, "I know you're backed up by the family Bible, but the last figger in the date looks blurred an' I'm not sure it ain't been changed."

She said this cackling shrilly, and Maud bit her lips to keep silence, realizing what little chance she had in a duel of words with her more skillful aunt.

Maud Green's life was not a happy one. She had become the belle of the village when Mrs. Lawton was married. She had reigned unchallenged for a number of years, and had treated the rustic swains about her a trifle scornfully. She had expected to find an Adonis and a Croesus united in the same personality, and he had not come to her. With the return of Alice and Faith's blossoming charms, Maud suffered a double eclipse. An added drop in her bitter cup was Faith's elevation to the solo parts in the choir. The result was that Maud had

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retired, "sulking in her tent," until Faith's downfall. For some strange reason Maud had considered herself vindicated by this misfortune, and had returned to the choir.

Redny Feathers had for several years "courted" her whenever he came to Wesley, and Maud, feeling rather desperate, unexpectedly accepted his proposal of marriage. This was a shock to Redny, for she had refused him many times before, and he was not sure he preferred Maud to several other young ladies in other towns to whom he had paid like attentions. The new preacher, so young, so handsome, and, as rumor said, "with money," impressed Maud wonderfully. When he preached his first sermon, it brought such thrills to her heart as she had not felt for a long time. She resolved that she would do her very best to capture him. This afternoon, as she watched from the window, there was a touch of color on her pale cheeks.

"Mis' Lawton must be givin' the preacher an awful good time," remarked Abby. "He's been there twice as long as with the Belchers."

"Trust her," said Maud, with a toss of her head. "She's got on her blue challis, too. I saw her through the window."

"There he comes now," cried Abby, looking over her shoulder, and Maud hurried across the room and took her place in a chair near the window, with some "tattling" in her hand.

Gray's hand was on the latch of their gate, but there it rested, and a moment later, David French appearing, they both crossed the street and sat down on the front steps of the parsonage piazza. It was a terrible disappointment to Maud, who threw her tattling into the middle of the floor, and disappeared into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. Abby got herself out of the black

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cashmere with many contortions to reach the buttons on her back, not caring to make any request of Maud at the moment, and, slipping into her faded calico, went into the kitchen, contenting herself with reflections against Mis' Lawton and criticism of her pastor.

Quite unconscious of the disappointment he had caused, Gray talked with his youngest elder. David French was the only man in the village whose training had been such as to give him much in common with John Gray. Unconsciously the preacher hoped for a close association with David. Very young French looked; he wore a cloth cap, rather on the back of his head, and his brown hair was in disorder. His face was flushed, his collar wilted, and there was a streak of dirt on his forehead.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gray," he said, "but when I left school some of the big boys were kicking a football about and I could not resist the temptation of joining with them."

"Did you play in college?" inquired Gray.

"Yes," answered French; "I was quarterback on the freshman team, although really too light for the job and not very good at it. My best game was baseball. I get crazy for it every spring about the time the blossoms come out on the apple trees."

"I'm sorry I did n't do anything with outdoor sports when I was in college," declared Gray. "I know now I missed a lot. It was n't my fault; my guardian kept me busy at my books and made me study the Olympic Games instead. But he kept me in good shape with long tramps through the woods, and I did Swedish exercises every morning. He was very systematic about it, and I suppose I was as well developed as any of the men, although I lost all the fun of it."

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"Too bad," said French sympathetically.

"Well, it's too late now," declared Gray. "I would like to use whatever strength I've got for one thing in this village."

"What is that?" asked French.

"I'd like to pull down the walls of the Daniel Webster Club. As near as I can find out, that's the center of all the evil in Wesley."

"It's quite a contract," remarked French. "Pasco Tripp's at the head of it, and he's a hard man to beat."

"Tell me about him," urged Gray.

"Well, Pastor," answered French, "I make it my rule not to talk much about people unless I can say something good about them. I'll go so far as to remark that about Pasco I prefer to be silent. There are lots of bad stories about him, and there's likely to be some fire where there's such a lot of smoke."

"From what Elder Belcher tells me," declared Gray, "no effort has been made to reach Pasco Tripp to reform or convert him. I mean to see if something can't be done, with the help of the Lord."

"If you succeed," observed French, "it will be such an exhibition of God's power as will convince every one in the Adirondacks."

"There is another matter I wish to ask you about, Brother French. Have you a good broker in the city?"

"Yes," replied French. "Curtis and White acted for my father, and since his death I have had a few transactions with them."

"I want them to help me to help some one else. Yesterday I took a drive with Mr. Warner. Although he made no appeal to me and practically told me he would not accept assistance, I believe he is very poor; he has a sick wife, and

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Elder Crocker is making him very unhappy by dunning him for bills long over-due. Mr. Warner tells me that he has a hundred shares of stock, for which he paid three dollars a share, and which at last reports was worthless. I should like to buy this stock for, say, four dollars a share, and want somebody to act for me who will keep silent."

"I think you're right," declared French, "and I ought to have realized it long ago. I'll arrange this for you on one condition, and that is, that I buy half the stock. It's mighty good of you to think of this, when you've only been a few days in the village, and I don't propose to let you have a chance to shame me by doing this alone."

"All right," assented Gray, "you shall do your share. I don't see how one Christian church can expect the Lord's blessing while the pastor of a sister church is suffering."

"I'll write the brokers this very night," said French, rising, his face eager with anticipation.

"I called on Faith Harding yesterday, and I am prepared to side with you and Elder Belcher. She is sincerely repentant, and although she declines to come before the Board, I shall advise that she be reinstated after public confession. You think we are right?"

"Yes," replied French, "I think we are right."

"What a cowardly brute the man must be!" exclaimed the preacher. "How beautiful she is, too. I should think the man would be glad to marry her."

At that moment, breaking the evening silence, there came the cry of a child, first a little whimper and then the wail of a baby longing for its mother. They could hear the sound of hurrying feet and Faith's voice as she took the baby in her arms and hushed it.

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"I must be going now," declared French. "Good-night."

The preacher watched the slight figure disappear in the darkness, and went into the house. He lit the lamp, and, lingering a moment before he pulled down the curtains, he saw Alice standing at her window. A wood fire behind her was sending out its flickering flame and she appeared now clear and bright, now dark and somber. He was wondering what was the real character of this woman when, apparently noticing Gray for the first time, she drew her own curtain, and was no longer visible.

Did she think he was watching her, he asked himself indignantly, but as he took his seat at the desk he realized that that was exactly what he was doing. Why was it that he was always appearing in an awkward light before Alice Hale?

CHAPTER XI

VERY early the next afternoon John Gray started out again on his ceremonial calls, and the first on the list was Miss Green. Abby and Maud, in spite of their readiness on the previous day, were after all caught unprepared, as were the foolish virgins.

"Jerusalem!" exclaimed Abby, from her seat at the window. "Here comes the preacher straight for our gate. Lordy massy! Here I am in this ragged poplin 'n' you half dressed. What shall we do?"

"You'll have to see him just as you are then," replied Maud, clad lightly, standing before the mirror in the bedroom, curling her hair with a slate pencil. "'T won't matter so much for you."

"I suppose it won't," declared Abby, tacitly assenting to Maud's matrimonial plans, and, shutting the bedroom door, she answered the jangling doorbell and admitted the preacher. "Glad to see you, Pastor; let me take your hat, 'n' set right down here in this rockin'-chair by the window."

John Gray took the proffered seat and listened to Abby's vivacious conversation without saying very much himself. He had a lively scorn for her bitter tongue, and she was resentful at the preacher's words when she came before the Board. There was no sympathy between them and they were both glad when Maud emerged from the bedroom. She was dressed in a "tea-gown" copied from the *Weekly Farmer*, and "created" by her own fair hands. Her dark hair curled gracefully at neck and forehead, and a red rose nestled among her black tresses. Little

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did the preacher realize how much time and thought had been given to Maud's decoration, and, sad to relate, he was little affected by her charms. Abby excused herself promptly, and Gray was left to the niece's blandishments. Maud seated herself in a willow chair facing the preacher, where the light from the window shone through a pink vase, giving a touch of color to her pale cheeks. Beginning with the inevitable question of how he liked Wesley, and, progressing through safe remarks about the weather, her conversation became more intimate. She told of her solicitude about her Sabbath-School class of young girls.

"You see, Faith Harding has been teaching them for three or four years, and in spite of her going wrong some of the class seem to miss her. Of course I don't say anything against Faith, but they know pretty well how I feel."

"I can very well understand," declared Gray, "that they should have the feeling of loyalty toward her. I am not sure you can do any more than try to win their personal affection and trust to time."

"Oh, I'm sure they're coming to like me. I never yet have failed when I really tried. You see, I took Faith's place in the choir, too, 'n' Faith had a good voice. Of course, not cultivated like mine. You see, I'm takin' vocal lessons from Miss Nelson over at Glens Falls. She's been going over 'The Holy City' with me, and I'm plannin' to sing it on Sunday. Would you like to hear it now?"

Gray naturally giving his consent, Maud took her seat at the little organ in the corner, and after rendering "The Holy City" with much feeling, she sang "The Blue Alsatian Mountains" and finished with "Is it a Dream, Then Waking would be Pain." Maud sang the last with an occasional glance at Gray, and he, feeling rather uncom-

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fortable, although too unsophisticated to interpret Maud's maneuvers, rose to take his leave, pleading the necessity of many calls. She watched the straight figure disappear down the street, on the whole pleased with the preacher's first visit and decidedly of the opinion that she had made an impression upon him. As a matter of fact, Gray had hardly noticed either Abby or Maud, so occupied was his mind with the thought of the next call he was planning to make.

On the list which Crocker had given him Mrs. Davis's name followed Abby Green's, but the preacher had decided he would see Pasco Tripp instead. He felt very much like a young knight starting out to meet in the lists an antagonist renowned for strength and skill, one whose lance had humbled many an adversary into the dust. There was no fear in John Gray's stout heart; "if the Lord be with me, who can be against me?" and kindred texts came to his mind. Pasco Tripp was the inspirer and leader of most of the evil in Wesley. But in spite of all that had been said against him, he could not be all bad — there must be some redeeming quality. Prayerful effort should at least restrain and moderate Pasco's wicked deeds and might convert the sinful man and lead him in the paths of righteousness.

So occupied was Gray's mind with plans for saving Pasco's soul, that he barely noticed Ira Harp as he passed the blacksmith shop, nor did he speak to Tom Lunn, who was pitching horseshoes with a tall young man from the "mountain" whose horse was being shod by Ira. Pitching horseshoes was the principal outdoor sport of Wesley. Usually it was for the love of the game, but occasionally small bets were made. It was the best thing that Tom Lunn did, only Pasco Tripp and Jude being more skill-

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ful, and these Tom had learned to let alone. It was generally agreed that Jude was the "champeen," but a match between him and Pasco was a close contest.

A little farther back from the road than the blacksmith shop was the livery stable, with its wide-open door. There was a litter of straw around it, a snow-plough and two decrepit wagons were standing out in the open, and underneath was the pig-pen, its denizens pushing their pink snouts through the wide cracks. Pasco sat in an old wooden chair tilted against the corner of the doorway. His hat was pulled down over his eyes, so that its rim almost touched the long cigar at which he was puffing. From this vantage Pasco could see all that passed along the street, and by turning his head he could watch everything that went on in the barn. Although he saw Gray the moment the latter turned in from the street, he appeared not to notice until the preacher paused before him. Then, leaning forward, his chair struck the floor with a thump, and he rose up like a "Jack" in his box. The effect was disconcerting, particularly as Pasco did not speak at once. The slanting platform of the stable gave him the advantage of a few inches, and, although the men were of the same height, Pasco looked down on Gray. It was more than a physical "looking down," for the smile on Pasco's face was cynical, and his bright eyes shone through their narrowing slits like those of a ferret. Always before there had been the length of the church between them, Gray elevated in his pulpit, with the strength and dignity of his position as a Christian clergyman to support him.

Gray's glance was friendly, questioning, almost curious. Pasco's face expressed an uncanny knowledge of and scorn for the man before him. It was the seeming superiority an understanding of evil has over a knowledge

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of good — something the world seldom questions. Pasco was the first to speak. Extending his hand, he welcomed the preacher with —

“Glad to see you, Mr. Gray. Do you want a rig? Or is this just a call?”

“Just a friendly call,” replied Gray, looking clear-eyed into the strange new country of Pasco’s soul.

They faced each other, silent, until Pasco, turning on his heel, opened the door of his little office in the corner. Following Gray in, he pointed to a vacant chair and emptied another for himself by throwing an old harness on the floor. The room was a dozen feet square, with two windows. There was a desk in the corner, covered with papers, and a lounge with a miscellaneous load of robes, blankets, and old clothes on it. There were some fine harnesses with gilt trimmings in the glass case on the wall, and two or three dusty pictures of horses were hung at crazy angles. The air was close and permeated by the acrid odor of harness dressing. A door was open in the back of the room, through which could be seen a double row of stalls, with the hind quarters of the horses, their tails switching at the hungry flies. Beyond them, in one corner was a watering-trough, and some grain-chests in the other. Through the wide door in the back of the barn there were visible a varied assortment of “rigs”; a big three-seater wagon, top buggies, buckboards, and carriages with parasol tops and fringes. An old man was currycombing a horse, his hissing being punctuated by the stamping of the restive hoofs. Underneath, the pigs were squealing and grunting.

“I s’pose it’s no use asking you to take something,” said Pasco. “I keep a little in the drawer here, in case of sickness.”

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"No," replied Gray calmly, "I am very well."

"And you look it; but tell me if you change your mind and have a fainting spell."

"I will," said Gray.

"Can I offer you a cigar, then? 'Tis not too good, though one of Crocker's best."

"No, thank you. I do not smoke."

"They say every man has his weakness. I hope yours is n't the women."

Gray was resolved to keep his temper. He did not answer, and Pasco continued:

"Smoking is the only bad habit I've got. Nothing in the Bible against it, is there?"

"I know of nothing, but I need neither a stimulant nor a sedative."

"That's interesting. You don't want speeding up nor slowing down. Running just right. Some ministers give sedatives instead of taking them — sermons, I mean. If I'm troubled with insomnia, I can slip into the Baptist Church on a Sunday morning and Parson Warner puts me to sleep before he gets to 'secondly.' I did n't have much trouble in keeping awake over your first sermon. Can you keep up that gait right along?"

"I hope so," replied Gray.

"Well, I don't want to flatter you, but I consider your talk on Gideon one of the best I've heard in the old Methodist Church, and I'm some judge. I go every Sunday morning, unless something special interferes like — a horse-race or a cock-fight. My only criticism is that, knowing the village of Wesley pretty well, I'm afraid if you're its Gideon, you'll have a dum small army to follow you. You set too high a standard for common folks to measure up to."

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"I only set the Bible standard," replied Gray, restraining his resentment at the patronising tone in which Pasco spoke.

"Well, don't trot the first 'half' so fast you won't be able to finish the full mile," advised Pasco patronisingly. "And, as you don't drink or smoke, you'd better look out for the girls. That may be your weakness. They'll all be after you. A man that's young and good and handsome, and got a heap of money, is a combination you don't often find."

"Does it amuse you to talk like that?" asked Gray, the color showing in his cheeks, in spite of himself.

"I'm not joking, believe me," declared Pasco, pleased to see that he had touched the preacher, and he rambled on, like a philosopher to a young scholar. "I don't suppose there's any one in the village better qualified to advise you in this serious matter. I'm thirty-five years old, and I've made love to every female in the village, from Abby Green to Molly Belcher. With some 'twas what you would call Platonic, and with some 'twas — more. I'm not a marrying man, but you're the kind that's doomed to be a husband. There's the mark of the halter on your face. Now let's examine the stock in the village. First there's Mrs. Lawton. You called on her yesterday and looked her over. She's attractive, is n't she?" Pasco paused for an answer, but getting no reply, continued,

"She's had experience, too, well broken to harness, no tricks, not a spot or blemish on her. The fact she's got money I suppose won't especially appeal to you, but it's not her fault, and ought not to be held against her. How'd she suit?" Again receiving no response, Pasco's smooth speech went on. "Next to her comes Maud Green. She's a little younger, not so fresh-looking, but pale and inter-

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esting, almost handsome. The fact she's poor won't feaze you. Then Maud has accomplishments that specially qualify her for a minister's wife. She can play the organ and sing. Last but not least Maud wants a husband, she's almost dying for one, and she'd love a man almost to death. You've come here straight from Maud's house. What do you think of her?"

Gray was startled by the knowledge that Pasco had of his movements, but his expression did not change. He was resolved that nothing could make him lose control of himself. He sat before the man, listening to him, studying him as he would a strange beetle, determined that when the time came he would make an appeal which should in some way find a joint in the armor of indifference and evil.

"You don't want Maud?" asked Pasco. "Too bad. She will be disappointed. I'm afraid you're hard to please. The Wesley market ain't overstocked neither. I can't think of but two more. The first is Alice Hale." Pasco rose from his seat and paused for a moment, then went on monotonously. "Of course she's the pick of the bunch. She's handsome, high-spirited, intelligent, and honest. I would n't speak of her to you if I had n't tried to get her myself and failed. She understands me and naturally won't marry me." Instinctively Gray understood that the man before him was telling the truth about Alice. As he spoke there came a peculiar softness in his tones. He paced up and down the little room for a full minute, but when he continued his voice was hard and monotonous again.

"'T would n't be right for me not to tell you that Alice has a temper of her own, perhaps it would be fairer to say she's high-spirited. They tell me it was bully the

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way she faced you and the Board on Monday night. I have n't heard how you got on with her and Faith at the studio, but I'll bet she held her own."

At this Gray winced and Pasco laughed aloud.

"Alice is a colt that's never been properly broke, and will always need to be driven with a curb bit and a long whip. My God! how I'd like to break her!" Again Pasco paused, then, looking into Gray's face, he said, "You don't need to tell me, Preacher, your choice is Alice Hale."

"I've made no choice," replied the minister, his face white with repressed anger, but his voice calm and measured. "I am bearing this foolishness of yours for the sake of the Lord and in the hope that I may help His cause. Have you finished?"

"Not quite," answered Pasco. "I know you'll try to get her, but in case she says no, as she may, we'll take the last on the list, Faith Harding."

At this Gray half rose from his seat, his face aflame, but Pasco continued quietly:

"Faith, in her way, is just as pretty as Alice; you'd get a ready-made child, too. Of course, the father might turn up and rob you of him. By the way, do you know who the father is?"

"No," answered Gray; then, almost involuntarily, "are you the father?"

"Not me," replied Pasco. "I know, but won't tell. 'T will surprise you."

"Nothing would surprise me very much after listening to you," declared Gray. "I have been patient through all in the hope that you would listen to me at the end. Do you not understand that you are a sinner, that the 'wages of sin is death'? Has not the call of the Spirit come to you,

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bidding you to repent? Think of all the good you could do with the clear brain and the power of speech that you possess. Think how much you could help me in this village."

When Gray ended his appeal, Pasco answered in pretended seriousness:

"I can't join your church, Preacher, because I'm inclined to believe in baptism by immersion only, and I can't join the Baptist Church, for I'm sure I'm not a close-communicant. Still, in any way I can I'll be glad to help you?"

"Will you?"

"I distinctly said I would," declared Pasco. "They say that money talks." He drew a roll of bills from his pocket, removed one, and handed it to Gray.

"There's a ten-dollar note. Use it as you like. That's more than any member of your church put in the contribution box last Sunday."

"I've been told you are the church's greatest enemy in Wesley," said Gray, ignoring the money, and the insult.

"A sort of general of the Midianites, am I?" laughed Pasco, putting the bill back in his pocket. "Somebody's been lying about me. Ask Jude. He'll be here soon with the stage."

"I've been told that Jude gets his liquor at the Daniel Webster Club, of which you are the leader."

"I've got my enemies, and so has the club. They raided us last winter, and could n't find a drop stronger than water. Our constitution says the purpose of the club is the physical, mental, and spiritual development of its members. The spiritual is mentioned last, but it's really first in our minds."

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"You know I understand you're trying to mock me. What's the use of it?"

"Why, Preacher! I've too much respect for the church. I tell you the Daniel Webster Club has a big Bible on its center table. Jude reads from it every Saturday night. Speaking of Jude, they tell me 't was your vote kept Jude from being expelled. We'll do all we can to help you keep him straight."

"I believe you have headed more young men and women toward perdition than any one else in Wesley. Are n't you ever ashamed of yourself, are n't you ever sick of sin? Does n't there sometimes come to you a desire to do right, to be a Christian?"

Pasco was about to reply when there came the sound of breaking glass, and, turning, Gray saw that the old man working on the horse had dropped a bottle of liniment on the floor. Almost as quick as Gray's glance was Pasco. Springing through the door he gave the man a blow that knocked him down and followed it with two kicks in the ribs, stopping only when the victim cried out for mercy. Pasco accompanied his demonstration with a string of oaths and a volley of obscene words.

Gray's very soul protested against the brutality, and he was sickened by the foul language. He had risen to his feet and was about to interfere, when Pasco returned and calmly took his seat as if nothing had happened to interrupt their conversation.

"Preacher, I claim to be as much a Christian as any one. Why, I'd have been either a minister or a missionary if I could have made up my mind which I was best suited for."

"Are n't you ashamed to talk to me like that, every word a lie? Are n't you afraid?"

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"I have no fear of God — or man — or devil."

As Pasco said this, he leaned forward until his face was close to that of Gray, who, looking into the red eyes, saw in them a light which made him catch his breath. Had he been a peasant in the hills of Sicily, he would have crossed himself and prayed to be delivered from the "Evil Eye." Methodist as he was, his mind went back to the stories in the Bible of those possessed with demons. Underneath the floor the pigs grunted and squealed. It was into a herd of swine that Christ sent the devils after they had been driven out of the demoniac. There came to the preacher the consciousness that in the man before him wickedness had become a madness. As Gray looked with horror into the soul given up to Satan, there came into his heart a great sorrow, a boundless pity.

He was about to speak, when there was a rattle of wheels, and Jude drove the stage into the barn, whistling cheerfully. His entrance seemed to put all evil spirits to flight. Pasco rose to his feet, laughing mockingly, and said:

"Well, Preacher, I've got some work to do."

He left the room and Gray followed him out on to the stable floor. All was noise and confusion, and in the midst of the commotion the preacher went away.

"What is the dividing line between sanity and insanity?" "Do evil spirits take possession of a soul now as in the Bible times?" He asked himself these and many like questions. Why was it that Pasco selected Alice Hale as the woman to be his wife — "your choice is Alice Hale" — Alice Hale, the infidel, Alice Hale, who had mocked and triumphed over him.

CHAPTER XII

THE first "class-meeting" is almost as much of a test for a new minister as his first sermon. Success depends on a certain deftness, the quick seizing of a thought, a kind of good-fellowship and a Christian mesmerism which will move a modest member of the congregation to speak or pray in public. John Gray was handicapped by his visit on Pasco Tripp, for his mind was so occupied there was little space for any other thought.

Fortunately, the first quarter hour was given to a "song-service," led by Elder Belcher and assisted by Maud Green at the organ. During this time the preacher, seated behind his little pulpit, had no duty but to "look and listen," and he went from page to page of the hymn book, turning the leaves mechanically.

The class-meeting room occupied nearly all the basement of the church. It was low and lighted by bracket lamps, some of which flared and smoked. The wooden settees were unpainted, and creaked and rattled on the uneven floor.

The first rows were occupied by gray-beards and white-haired members of the congregation; Granny Jenks, who was stone deaf, on the front seat, under the minister's very nose. She used an ear trumpet as if it was a pistol, which was disconcerting to a new minister.

Deacon Harding was in the second row on the middle aisle, surrounded by others who were going down the "westering slope." Then came Mrs. Davis, with Mrs. Harp on one side, and Ira Harp on the other, the congregation arranging itself according to age, with the young

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people in the rear of the church. There were exceptions, however. Abby always located herself well back and on the side where she could see all that was going on. Elder Crocker sat so he could keep the boys quiet, and Jude on the very back row close to the door, the same position he always took in the church above.

The "boys" included James Bullock, who was twenty-one, and Tug Belcher of twelve. These sat on the right. Across the aisle were the girls of like ages, and some were guilty of the shy coquetry of smiles and glances, intended to encourage the young men of their choice to "see them home."

At the service of song Elder Belcher was in his element, and so was Maud. The Elder stood by the organ, occasionally beating time, but rarely, for his great voice carried all the others on its wave of sound. Maud felt her importance, and sometimes between verses "improvised," to show her mastery of the instrument. James Bullock's voice was occasionally audible over the others, and Ed Fay could frequently be heard when the notes ran high and most of the others "dropped out."

But Jude always stayed with him. He had a voice as sweet as that of a 'cello and he sang as unconsciously as a blackbird. He had been the "tenor" of the "old choir," which included Elder Belcher, Abby Green before her voice had been soured by time and temper, and poor Annie Rainsford, who had joined the "choir invisible."

The Wesley Methodist was a singing church, and sang for the love of it. Even John Gray found himself humming under his breath.

There were requests for favorite songs, and when Mrs. Harp suggested "The Green Hill," Elder Belcher asked Jude to sing it alone:

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"There is a green hill far away
Without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all . . .
Oh, dearly, dearly has He loved,
And we must love Him too,
And trust in His redeeming blood
And try His works to do."

The Deacon asked for "Rock of Ages," and Elder Crocker for a cheerful hymn, the refrain of which was, "But, oh, their doom, their awful doom." Little Tug Belcher's favorite was "Pull for the shore, sailor." Tug, like many an inland village boy, had heard the call of the sea. Maybe it had come to him from a huge conch shell on the sitting-room shelf, which he loved to hold to his ear, and from which he could hear the sound of the waves and the wind.

After him Beulah rose, and, with many contortions of her twisted mouth, succeeded in requesting, "I want to be an angel." She had asked for this song again and again, and it always caused smiles from the thoughtless. She did not notice them, however, but listened rapturously while they sang:

"I want to be an angel,
And with the angels stand,
A crown upon my forehead,
A harp within my hand."

Poor Beulah, the object of laughter, scorn, and pity in Wesley, she looked forward to the time when she should stand before "the great white throne," radiant, serene, and beautiful — "like other folks."

When the service of song was over, the preacher led in prayer, and then read the story of the young man with great possessions, who came to Jesus and went away sor-

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rowing because he was commanded to sell all and give to the poor.

The meeting was then open for a few remarks on the Bible reading, short prayers, and the telling of experiences. The first to speak was an old uncle of Elder Crocker's who had always been too lazy to work and as a result was very poor. He reminded his hearers of the time the early Christians had "everything in common," and advocated the immediate division of the tangible assets of the members of the Wesley Methodist Church. So zealous and enthusiastic was he that his nephew Asa, who "had great possessions," squirmed in his seat. Mrs. Davis then testified to "an ever-present Jesus, who helped her in all her troubles." A little fellow in the rear of the room gave his testimony, telling how he always wished "to be found on the Lord's side."

At this moment the preacher caught Jude's eye, who rose and said: "Sometimes a man's willin' to give up an' wants to, but he can't. I ask the prayers of the church to help me in my struggle against a besettin' sin."

Then Elder Crocker got on his feet to speak. "It is n't always money, brethren and sisters, that we're asked to sacrifice. Sometimes the Lord wishes to have money accumulated in the hands of those who can use it for the glory o' God. A Christian instead o' money is often asked to give up his time and energy instead." (The latter allusion was, of course, to Asa's own service.) "Again 't is the givin' up worldly pleasure, like dancin', card-playin', an' the theater. I'm told there's young folks, members o' this church, too, what danced down to the 'Grove' last summer an' some that played cards in a certain settin'-room in this village. S'pose it wa'n't for money. That'll come next, if they don't watch out. All them things are

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worse than money earnt honest an' by the sweat er the brow."

Asa sat down, not having convinced his poorer friends and realizing that he had defended a "lost cause." Asa's confusion was increased by the fact that while he talked Elder Belcher's boy Tug had moved the Elder's tall hat a few inches from its place on the settee. When the owner sat down, his head-piece was crushed so it looked like an accordion. This prank was hidden by all in the front rows, who thought the Elder had been careless, and this opinion was helped by the almost too innocent expression on Tug's face. The younger generation, however, in the rear, had watched the maneuver with delight, and ill-concealed laughter crowned its success. It greatly troubled John Gray, although the confusion only lasted for a moment and ended when he called on Deacon Harding to lead in prayer. No one could fail to take the Deacon seriously. His petitions were long, fervent, and composed mainly of Bible quotations. He confessed to "wandering in by and forbidden paths," and included all the rest of the congregation with him. He begged forgiveness for whatever "thy pure eyes behold amiss in us," and sat down leaving a lively consciousness of sin and the imminence of a particularly torrid hell.

He was followed by Mrs. Harp, who declared her intention of walking in the "straight and narrow path," and then Maud rose from her seat at the organ and recited:

"Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."

It was not orthodox to quote from any profane author at an evening meeting, but Maud thought it seemed a sign

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of gentility and could not be frowned down. Then came a volley of Bible verses from the young people, some being inspired to add a few words of their own.

The tide of testimony having ebbed, Gray rose to his feet and made the usual appeal: "Is there not some one here to-night weary of sin, who would like the prayers of the church? Is there not one here to-night who will rise up and take a stand for Jesus?"

There is nothing more solemn than the stillness which follows this entreaty. It is a homely "call to the cross" without the romance of the Crusades. To the few in the congregation who were not professing Christians there came an emotional pressure hard to resist. At first none rose, then Maud sang in a low and trembling voice, and was joined by others, all singing softly — "Almost persuaded, Christ to receive." At the end came,

"Almost will not avail,
Almost is but to fail,
Sad, sad, that bitter wail,
Almost — but lost."

In the hush that followed this, the pressure was almost like a physical force, and a tall young fellow from the sawmill rose, his lip trembling with emotion. No one else rising, the preacher prayed fervently that this inquirer might be "gathered into the fold."

It was now approaching the end of the service, and John Gray spoke a few words in explanation of the Bible lesson, declaring that Christ's command to the young man was a test of his sincerity. "To all of us He gives some trial. We must all of us make some sacrifice, money, pleasure, time, or service. First of all we must give ourselves to the Lord."

It still lacked a few minutes of closing time, and a si-

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lence following which no one seemed inclined to break, John Gray, meeting Ira's earnest glance, said, "Will Brother Harp lead us in prayer?"

If he had not covered his eyes, the preacher would have seen the horror on Ira's face and the mingled consternation and amusement of the congregation. Ira was a pillar of the church, faithful and devoted. He rang the bell, gave liberally, and was always ready to help a neighbor in sickness or misfortune; but he could not "speak in meetin'." For years he had not even tried, and no one thought of calling on him. He liked the new minister and wanted to help him. He felt the mental pressure of those around, and it gradually overcame his inertia. He rose slowly, white-faced and trembling. "O Lord," he began, in a low voice, and then stopped. "O Lord," he said again in louder tones. Then followed a long and ghastly silence, ending in a whispered "Amen," and Ira sat down, perspiration running down his cheeks, having made the shortest prayer in the record of the Wesley Church.

A few minutes after the clock in the spire struck "nine," and the congregation rose and sang, "Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing," the preacher pronounced the benediction, and his first evening class-meeting was over. He tried to see Ira and console him, but the poor man had bolted as soon as the outside door was open. There were the usual hand-shaking and scraps of conversation with the older people, but the young folks quickly melted away. The young men stood outside the vestry door and attached themselves to the girls as they emerged, only the very plain and very disagreeable being left to walk home alone. Some of the young men had "side-wheelers," which meant a girl on each arm.

John Gray was conscious that the meeting had not

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been a success. The discussion about the distribution of wealth, the disaster to Elder Crocker's best hat, and the calling upon Ira for prayer had all been unfortunate. Even without these untoward incidents, the preacher realized that his mind had not been on the meeting, but was occupied with the memory of his interview with Pasco. It was like a cloud over his spirit, and there was still visible the picture of evil he had seen in Pasco's eyes. When the preacher left Elder Crocker putting out the lights, he found Jude waiting for him at the door.

"Sorry to miss you this afternoon, Pastor. I did n't see you when I drove into the stable, and when I'd climbed down from my chariot, you'd gone off. Pasco says he had a long talk with you."

"Tell me about Pasco Tripp," demanded the preacher abruptly. "You've known him all your life. You see him every day. Is he as wicked as he seems? Is he wholly given over to sin? I could not do justice to myself to-night, so completely did the thought of him take away the witness of the spirit. I know how badly I failed."

"Well, Pastor," declared Jude, "you ain't got nothin' to feel sorry for. I think you did fine. Perhaps you did n't show quite the same turn of speed you did Sunday, but you trotted fair an' steady without the sign of a break, an' the Lord knows there was enough to send you up in the air. Asa settin' on his hat an' Ira's prayer was enough to send any four-year-old to a break. Evenin' meetin's take experience, an' that you'll git more 'n' more every week. You had no way of knowin' that Ira could n't git on his feet without losin' his mind. I'm awful sorry for him, because he's dreadful fond of Betsy an' livin' separate hurts him bad. As fer Tug, 'Lige will give him a lesson when he gits him home that will keep that boy quiet a good long

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spell. Belcher's good-natured, but he won't stand havin' the meetin' disturbed. After he's interviewed Tug 'behind the woodpile' with a hickory stick, the boy'll lose some o' his sense of humor. He's the most promisin' youngster in the village, but he's been feelin' his oats lately, an' kickin' over the traces. A'good lickin' 'll do him a lot o' good."

"Have Mr. and Mrs. Harp quarreled?" inquired Gray.

"Quarreled!" exclaimed Jude. "Quarreled an' separated. I'll tell yer how it happened. You see they ain't a good match. Ira's steady an' practical, tends to his blacksmith shop, eats three meals a day, an' don't care for no more society than what he gits at church. On the other side Betsy's high-strung an' ambitious. She's good-lookin' an' likes to dress well an' visit among her friends in the evenin'. She was the prettiest girl in Wesley in her day. Then came Mis' Lawton, then Maud, then Alice, an' Faith. Funny, is n't it, how there's always one girl in the village that the boys all want. Well, gittin' back to the Harps, you see, Ira comes home from the shop, washes himself, eats his supper in his shirt-sleeves, reads the paper an' goes to bed at nine o'clock. He's tired an' sleepy. Betsy does n't want to turn in at nine o'clock, an' though she tried awful hard to be content stayin' home every night, she did n't really like it. Ira went out with her once in a blue moon, an' I think they both tried to be agreeable, it gettin' on their nerves all the time, particularly Betsy's. What brought matters to a head was this: a young feller from the city offered Ira a ten-dollar note for the chance to paint 'Paduca's Panacea' on the roof of the blacksmith shop, an' Ira took it. The money looked good to him, an' he had no idea he was gettin' into trouble. The roof is right across from their house, an' when

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Ira told Betsy, she 'lowed she wa'n't goin' to gaze on them big letters an' to read 'Paduca's Panacea' the rest of her natural life. Ira said the contract was only for one year, an' Betsy said not for a single day would she face that sign. Ira must make his choice between the ten dollars, with the sign, an' her. Ira had n't meant any harm, but he got het up with Betsy's talk, said he'd made his bargain, an' proposed to keep it. The roof was n't so handsome that a little paint would spoil it. I don't believe Ira thought that Betsy'd hold out, but she moved her things into the back bedroom, said she'd occupy that an' the kitchen, leavin' the front bedroom an' the parlor for Ira. He could get what pleasure he liked out o' the view of 'Paduca's Panacea,' but she preferred the back yard. They've been livin' this way now for some months. They're both sick, but 'spunky.' I tried to help 'em, but Betsy told me politely to mind my own business, an' Ira used words that would have caused him to be brought before the Official Board if the Deacon had heard it. The Bible says, 'Blessed are the peacemakers,' but I guess the blessedness comes somewhere besides here. I know I did n't get no blessin' from Ira."

"It's too bad," declared the preacher. "Perhaps I can think of some way to make them friends again."

"Yes," said Jude, and would have continued, but the preacher interrupted:

"Tell me about Pasco Tripp."

"You want to know about Pasc? Well, I hardly know what to say. O' course he ain't what you'd call pious, but I ain't findin' any chariot of fire waitin' outside the stable to take me to heaven like Elisha, because I'm too good for this wicked world. I don't remember any one bein' taken out o' Wesley in this way, an' I'd in-

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sure others besides Pasco. I'm afraid poor Pasc ain't got the 'grace o' God' in his heart as I hope I have; but the Good Book says, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels' — just 'earthen vessels.' That means the best of us ain't got no occasion to feel puffed up. I know I'm half-baked clay an' cracked at that. I sure ain't got nothin' to say ag'in' Pasc. He does use awful bad words at times, but he don't mean nothin' more than I do when I say 'Gosh.' They tell bad stories 'bout him an' the girls, but I don't know nothin' an' don't believe 'em. He pays me my wages regerlar, an' he goes to church 'most every Sunday mornin'. I include Pasco in my prayers, an' I'm hopin' some day he'll see the light." By this time they had reached John Gray's gate. "Good-night," said Jude. "Next Sunday I got to make my public confession. I'll do my best to keep straight, but I hope you'll pray for me on Saturday night."

"I surely will pray for you then, Jude," replied Gray, "and every night until you get the best of your besetting sin."

He watched the stage-driver's square figure disappear in the darkness; as he closed the gate, he repeated Jude's words and said, "I'll include Pasco in my prayers and hope some day he'll see the light." In spite of this, he lay awake a long time and could see a pair of evil eyes looking at him out of the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII

ON Saturday afternoon, his sermon finished, John Gray set out, free-hearted, for a long walk. He had kept up this habit of his boyhood and youth, as taught by the old professor, but since his arrival at Wesley, he had not been able to spare the time for a good tramp. To-day he followed the main road part-way to the Junction, then striking across the fields, he plunged into the woods. The tall trees welcomed him like an old friend returned from distant wandering. He had never been in these woods, but a wood-lover is always recognized. How many times he had followed Elton Jones's long strides through winding forest paths! He could give the name of every tree and flower and shrub that grew in the shadows. He walked until he came to rising ground, climbed over a mass of rocks and found himself on the edge of a little patch of green grass, which grew on the edge of a brook. He threw himself full length on the soft carpet, with a sigh of content. All around him were the tall trees, but over his head was a circle of blue, unbroken by branch or cloud. There was the odor of the pines, the splash of falling water, and the touch of the wind's cool fingers on his forehead. Now, for the first time, he threw off the malign influence of Pasco's evil spirit, and the little frets and worries that had come to him in his church work. Instead there came to him the thought of Alice Hale. His senses were certainly awake to the smell of the pines, the sound of the brook, and the caress of the breeze. He smiled at this thought. What a fool she had made of him! Well, he had certainly learned something from her. He would

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sometime show her he was not quite the dullard she thought him. What a pity it was she did not come to church. He wished she could hear him preach. He must persuade her to come into the fold. It was foolish to call her an infidel. The best way to reach her was to be honest and sincere, making no claims for the church or religion concerning which there could be any doubt or question. He would make no concession to what was false or wrong, but try to reach her on her own ground. In a little while the challenge would no longer appear in her face, and they could be friendly neighbors. Although he felt the responsibility of acquaintance with the women in his church, Alice Hale was the only one who very much interested him. She, at least, contradicted Schopenhauer's "A woman who is perfectly truthful and not given to dissimulation, is an impossibility." Even Elton Jones was not more straightforward than was Alice Hale.

He lay on the grass, his thoughts wandering far afield, until the sun was nearly set. Climbing the rocks again, he got a good view of the village and swung down through the trees until he struck the road close by the red bridge. The street was nearly deserted, for it was almost supper-time, and he met no one but Maud Green, who happened to emerge from her gate just as he was passing. She had watched a full hour at the west window, and had almost lost patience when John Gray's tall figure appeared at the top of the hill. She had a roll of music in her hand, and said she was starting to give a lesson to one of her pupils. The story had been prepared for use an hour before, but the preacher did not notice its improbability. She reminded him that she was to sing "The Holy City" in church the next morning, and declared that she had "worked it up a lot," and she hoped it would please him.

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She would have talked longer, had not the preacher excused himself on the ground that it was almost supper-time and Linda did not like to have him late.

Sunday morning, after the long walk of the previous afternoon, he did not waken until Linda called him. He ate his breakfast with zest, and afterward went out into the garden. It was a perfect Indian summer morning, and where the sun shone in sheltered nooks, it was as warm as August. Down in the woods, across the brook, he could hear a hermit thrush. At the sound of it, he looked over to the Frazer cottage almost involuntarily, just as Alice Hale was raising her window. They both remembered it was the thrush Gray confessed he had not heard at their first meeting in the studio. She looked down on the preacher, half challenge, half sympathy, on her face, and he looked back a little defiantly. This time he had heard the thrush; his glance told her this. She gave a little nod, and said, "Good-morning, Mr. Gray."

He said, "Good-morning. Have you heard the thrush?" And went to the old wooden seat in the garden, with a strange feeling of elation. Why should this woman, little more than a girl, have the power to stir him? It was the first time he had seen Alice smile except in scorn. What did it matter to him whether she smiled or frowned? It did matter; she was an unbeliever, and he was God's minister.

He should have been thinking of his sermon, for he did not depend wholly upon his manuscript. He found himself quoting Herbert's lines,

"Oh, day, so calm, so clear, so bright,
Sweet bridal of the earth and sky."

There came to him the wish that he need not go to church, that he might spend the morning in his sunshiny

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garden. He looked toward the street at a passing carriage, and saw what appeared to be a bale of brown sacking protruding from under the lilac bush, close by the corner of the house. He rose and went to it and found it was a man asleep, his head and shoulders hidden under the green leaves. He parted them and looked down on the upturned face of Jude Burt. Jude lay on his back, his hands outstretched, palms upward, his body abandoned to the double intoxication of liquor and deep sleep. His face was stained with the brown earth and a few leaves had fallen upon his bare breast, as if to hide the gaping shirt. The soiled collar was unbuttoned and the ends of his tie hung loose. His knees were smeared with mud, and his coat was marked with dry white paint, which he had rubbed from some friendly fence to which he had clung for support. His hat lay a few feet away, where it had tumbled when he sought the shelter of the lilac bush. It was on Jude's face that the preacher's eyes finally rested. His forehead showed white through the loose locks of hair, his cheeks were flushed, a deep scratch on one, from which a little blood had flowed. A brownish drool had stained his lips, trickled down the corner of his mouth, and dried upon his chin. In spite of all, Jude's expression was serene and childlike. He seemed lost in pleasant dreams — an elderly faun in Arcady, sleeping in a thicket.

Gray was fascinated by the *abandon* of the sleeper, whose chest rose and fell under the green leaves. He bent over him, and as he did so his nostrils caught the reek of whiskey, the sour, stale odor of an all-night's debauch. With this, Gray's fancy of faun and Arcady fled. Here was a beastly drunkard, a backslider, a disgrace to the church of which he, John Gray, was the spiritual leader.

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There came to him a physical loathing, almost a nausea. He touched the sleeping man with his toe, gently, then harder, so that he moved. Although Jude had slept long and his senses had been warmed by the autumn sun, he was still far from conscious. But though he did not wake, his nerves answered unconsciously to the touch. He stirred and a smile came to his face. It was such a smile as only children and men with innocent and kindly hearts could give, and there came to Gray a sudden overwhelming compassion. Jude had crept to his garden, had come to him in his trouble. Well, he had not made a mistake. There was a revolution in Gray's mind that made him forget that wickedness should be exposed, that sin must be punished. The only question was, How could he protect Jude from blame; how could he hide him from unfriendly eyes? He knew that Linda was probably in her room over the kitchen, dressing for church. He only gave a glance at the Frazer cottage; they were Jude's friends. But across the street was Abby, Abby the gossip, Abby the censorious. The lilac bush hid Jude where he lay, but how could he be gotten into the house without catching Abby's sharp eyes? The preacher looked through a gap in the branches. She was not at her window. He seized Jude by the legs, pulled him from under the lilac, then, taking him by the shoulders, he dragged the heavy body across the little strip of lawn, up the wooden steps, into the front door, and shut it silently behind him. The preacher went to the window, and saw Abby peering between the slats in her blinds. Her face was calm, however, and he was sure that he had been fortunate enough to have chosen a moment when "the faithful sentinel" had left her post. Jude was now safe from all but Linda.

There came to Gray a strange feeling of companionship

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for criminals. He could understand something of the feeling of a murderer who, having committed the crime, sought to hide the body of his victim. He must escape detection. The only safe place was the bedroom. Jude was no feather-weight: could he get him up the steep stairs? Again he caught him under the arms and, step by step, lifted the heavy body and placed it on a lounge in the corner of his bedroom. At this moment, the church bell began to ring. The preacher washed his hands hurriedly, gave a touch to his hair, and, locking the door after him, descended the stairs. He could see Linda's straight back disappearing through the gate, and knew that Jude for the moment was safe. He took his sermon from the desk, and left the house with a strange feeling of elation. There was something about the whole affair that appealed to a sporting instinct which had been as much starved as his other senses.

When he reached the church, the first to speak to him was Deacon Harding.

"I'm afraid Jude won't be here to-day to make his public confession. Pasco Tripp says Jude's been out all night. Do you think there's any use our expecting him?"

"I'm afraid not," replied the preacher calmly, but he did not say why, which in itself was a deception.

"What a strange smell there is in the church to-day," exclaimed the Deacon, sniffing.

"Yes, I wonder what it is," replied the preacher, as he left the Deacon. Only when he reached his little room in the corner of the church did he realize that he had in effect lied to the Deacon about Jude. He did not wonder what the odor was; he knew. He knew it was the reek of the stale whiskey; he knew where Jude was. Falling on his knees, he prayed God for forgiveness, but even as he

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spoke the words, there came to him no consciousness of sin. He rose, washed his hands and face again in the little bowl in the corner, brushed his hair and tried to smooth his rumpled collar. Then, as the bell was slowly tolling its last strokes, he took his sermon in his hand, mounted the pulpit steps, and seated himself in the big plush chair behind the pulpit.

During the singing, John Gray's thoughts clung to Jude fast asleep on the lounge in his bedroom; but with the reading of the Bible, with the prayer and the sermon, he put Jude out of his mind. He was continually reminded, however, by Jude's vacant seat, and he realized how much inspiration he had obtained from the stage-driver's sympathetic face.

On the other side of the church sat Pasco Tripp, his glance fixed and emotionless, as usual. But there seemed a new and added malevolence in his expression. He seemed to say, "I know all about you, all about Jude, all about everything. My friend, the devil, keeps me informed. Jude is sleeping in your bedroom now. You are concealing him, you are deceiving the members of your church."

In spite of Pasco Tripp, however, Gray did not falter. The "evidence of the spirit" was not with him, but a strong purpose had taken possession of his mind. He would save Jude. He preached fervently, and much of the time at Pasco. He was determined to keep Jude's secret, partly for Jude's sake, partly for his own, partly for the reputation of the church, but most of all that he might win in the game he was playing. John Gray had had few games. Only in prayer did he wholly forget himself, and remember his duty to God and his mission to the church.

When the service was over, Gray hurried home, but not quick enough to escape Asa, who walked by his side,

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unwilling to forego the pleasure of "gloating" over Jude's downfall.

"I'm afraid you was wrong, Pastor, when you voted with 'Lige an' David to keep Jude in the church. Where do you s'pose he is now?"

The preacher, having learned dissimulation, and wishing to avoid a falsehood, evaded the question, and listened patiently to Asa until he reached home. The Elder showed his inclination to make a little call on him, but was not encouraged. Gray hurried into the house. He could hear Linda in the kitchen, getting the cold dinner ready, for no cooking was allowed in the parsonage on the Lord's Day. Would it be possible to get Jude out without discovery by Linda? By this time he hoped he would be able to walk. Gray went to his room and unlocked the door. Where was Jude? Certainly not on the lounge where he had been left, nor in the closet, the only other place of concealment. The door into the hall had been locked. There was no question that Jude had been there, for the odor of stale whiskey still lingered, and Jude's tie was on the floor.

At last the preacher looked out of the window, almost with the feeling that Jude must have flown away. A stout trellis for climbing-roses reached to the very sill. He discovered that the bush had been partly torn from the trellis and one of the cross-bars had been broken. There was proof positive, however, as to how Jude had escaped, for in the soft earth were the marks of two big feet. He had evidently wakened, and, finding himself locked in, had made his escape. He was probably safe in his own room at the stable. The game was won, and the preacher was overjoyed at his triumph. Yet, as there came to him the sober second thought as he ate his cold dinner, he realized that the problem of Jude was still

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to be solved. In spite of penitence and good resolutions, in spite of prayer and admonition, Jude's taste for liquor still held the mastery over him. What could be done? Suddenly the thought came to him that Alice Hale might help. She and Faith were Jude's best friends. He would go to them and ask their help. He would go that very afternoon.

Four o'clock found Gray ringing the doorbell of the Frazer cottage. He was admitted by Kitty, who smiled him a welcome. Kitty had an eye for a good-looking man, and, in spite of his clerical costume, John Gray was by all odds the best in the village. She took him through the kitchen to the studio, and pointed to an arbor in the garden where Alice and Faith were seated.

"Here's the minister, Miss Hale," she cried — a not very ceremonious announcement, but Kitty's training was limited.

The arbor was a ramshackle affair, leaning crazily against an old pear tree and only held together by a wistaria vine. As Gray entered, the girls rose to meet him, Faith giving him a cold little hand and Alice as calm as if she had forgotten her experience in the studio. Faith had a piece of needlework in her hand, and Alice a yellow-covered novel. Gray took his seat, facing them, and went directly to the purpose of his call.

"I have come to ask you to help me with Jude. What can be done to make him give up drink?"

"He has promised me again and again," said Faith. "I'm afraid it's hopeless."

"Do you think it very bad for him to take a little when he's through his work on a Saturday night?" asked Alice.

"I think it's bad for him to take so much that he is without mind or conscience — so much that he cannot

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come to church on a Sunday morning," replied Gray.

"He certainly was late to-day," declared Alice, smiling. "How in the world did he happen to climb out of your bedroom window this noon? I thought at first 't was a burglar. I have seen nothing so exciting since I came to Wesley."

"Don't, Alice," begged Faith, her hand on her friend's arm. "She feels as badly as you do about Jude."

"In the first place," said Alice, "I don't feel as strongly as you do about drink. In the second place, I feel worse about Jude's making a beast of himself. He's dreadfully ashamed, and if he does n't give it up, you 'll put him out of the church. Thirdly, — this sounds like a sermon, does n't it? — I know if it had n't been for you he would have been expelled last Monday night. 'T would break Jude's heart, and it's the best in the village. I don't agree with you on many things, but I do want to tell you how thankful I am to you for saving Jude."

At these words of praise the color rushed into Gray's cheeks, and he was ashamed and a little resentful. He answered calmly, however.

"I am very doubtful about my decision. I shall be sure I failed in my duty unless Jude becomes a decent member of the church."

"He's as decent as Abby Green or Elder Crocker just as he is," declared Alice, "but I know that's not the question. He worships Faith, he likes me, and he has taken to you. We must work together to help him. If we can't, Jude will be expelled, he will lose courage, and instead of Saturday night only, he will be drunk every night in the week. I have an idea which I'll tell you when I work it out. There's another question which comes before Jude. Must Faith make a public confession of her sin?"

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At this sudden attack the preacher's face hardened.

"She must."

"I'm quite willing," interposed Faith. "I ought to do so."

"Well," declared Alice, "it is easier than appearing before the Board. I can see you five men as you sat together last Monday night. Elder Belcher was the only really human being. David French was silent and reserved, but he joined with Elijah, and they two were willing to let Faith off. Elder Crocker was ugly and vindictive. If he's a Christian, I pray I may never be. His 'milk of human kindness' has been soured by greed and dyspepsia. Deacon Harding —"

"Please don't," begged Faith.

"Deacon Harding," continued Alice, "had a face like one I have seen in a picture in Paris — one of the judges condemning Jeanne d'Arc to death. I've heard of the text the Deacon chose from the Bible to apply to Faith."

"I did not approve of that text," protested Gray.

Alice continued, ignoring his remark, "I can see you at your desk evidently sincere and wishing to do right, but cold and hard as Deacon Harding himself. The whole atmosphere of your study had a flavor of the Inquisition about it. You know that only my protest saved Faith then. You know that only my appeal last Tuesday morning in the studio saved her a second time. Do you suppose the last cost me nothing? The 'scarlet woman'!" As she said this, she rose to her feet, left them, and went into the house.

"Why, Alice!" cried Faith after her, and then, turning to Gray, she asked wonderingly, "What does she mean?"

"She will tell you if she thinks best," replied Gray, rising, a strange smile on his face.

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"Oh, dear!" said Faith, "I wish you and Alice could be friends. You have both been so good to me. She always shows her worst side to you. She's the kindest and best girl in all the world. Of course she does n't go to church, but she's really not an infidel at all."

"I'm sure I have no ill-will against her," declared Gray, looking down into the anxious face.

"I don't know what she thinks about you," said Faith. "At first she talked dreadfully about you, but now she does n't talk at all. I was hoping that she was beginning to understand you, but now she acts as if she almost hated you."

"Don't you fret, little girl. It will come out all right, I am sure. I must go now. Your father and Elder Crocker think me weak for not insisting that you come before the Board. It will be better that you wait a little while before you make confession. You may be sure I will do all I can to help you."

As he walked slowly home there was a feeling of elation which at first he could not explain. It was the emotion with which Alice spoke of the "scarlet woman." At least she did care that he should think well of her.

CHAPTER XIV

THE next morning, when John Gray awoke, the wind and the rain were stripping the leaves from the tall elms, the maples were being robbed of their glory, and only the somber pine trees were untouched. Morning after morning the Peri had been found on the window, and each day looking a trifle fatter and with a coat less ragged. But to-day the weather was so bad that even his courage was daunted. All day the pastor worked on his sermon. He saw Jude drive along the street toward the Junction, the water pouring from the black curtains of the stage, and again in the late afternoon he heard the rattling wheels and went to the window, hoping to get a glimpse of Jude. In the evening he expected every minute that Jude would call, but the bell was not rung. Once the preacher put on his coat and hat, but then decided that it was best to wait for Jude to come to him. In some mysterious way the stage-driver had crept into the preacher's heart. There was a pathetic appeal in the honest face, the blue eyes, and the sympathetic mouth so ready to smile in spite of trouble. Jude was always first in the preacher's prayers, and next to him came Faith. In his petitions he begged that this sad little girl might in some way be made happy again. He realized he had his work cut out before him at the next meeting of the Advisory Board, and he knew that the Deacon and Asa would fight hard for what they considered right.

From Faith his thoughts went to Alice Hale. He could see how proudly she had walked away from the arbor after she had spoken. She had praised him for his

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leniency toward Jude. What did he care either for her praise or blame? He would go his own way, acting as he thought right. He would yield only when he was sure the appeal was just. How scornfully she had said, "If Asa is a Christian, I don't want to belong to the church." Was it possible to persuade her to become a Christian? Although Pasco Tripp no longer occupied his mind to the exclusion of others, he often thought of him. Would it be possible to show this wicked man the error of his ways? Toward him Gray tried to look with a Christian spirit, but the Daniel Webster Club was not a person, and he had no scruples against hating it with a very hearty enmity. Here was the camp of the Midianites, and he was resolved to be the Gideon who should sometime cause their overthrow. This was his last thought as he went to sleep.

The next morning the rain had ceased, but the wind still blew in heavy gusts. After breakfast Gray was sitting in his study when there came a soft knocking on the front door. It was strange, for the bell-knob was plainly visible. He opened the door and found little Molly Belcher standing before him. She was too short to reach the bell.

"Please, Mr. Gray," she said, "can I have some raspberries?" putting a small and suspiciously sticky hand in the minister's palm.

"Of course," he replied, "if you can find them. I did n't know there were any in the garden."

"They're in the corner near the wall. Come and I'll show you."

He put on his hat, and Molly led him along the path to the far corner where were some bushes with a very few late berries on them.

"I see the bushes," said the minister. "but where are the berries?"

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"I eated them," declared the little girl, with an eloquent gesture. "They're here."

"So you ate the berries first and asked for them afterwards?"

"Yes. I thought you might say 'No.'"

"I see," remarked the minister; "but suppose I said 'No' now, after all."

"'T would be too late," replied Molly calmly. "I've eated them. They're all gone, 'cept a few. I'll come again to-morrow and finish them. Good-bye."

"But where are you going, my pretty maid?" asked Gray as Molly started for the board fence in which there was no sign of a gate.

"This way," she replied. "My brother Tug made it. There's been lots of good things in your garden."

Molly calmly lifted a wide board from the bottom of which the nails had been pulled, those remaining at the top acting like a hinge, and, disappearing through the gap, the board went back into place.

"Indeed, master Tug," remarked the minister, "I must have you repeat the Ten Commandments for me with special emphasis on the eighth. You seem to have forgotten 'Thou shalt not steal.'"

He was about to enter the house again when there appeared a young man with a wooden case in his hand, apparently a peddler. He handed the preacher a card, on which was printed the name of "Bent and Son," and said:

"I've been sent here to fix the church clock."

"Yes," replied Gray. "I'm glad to see you. Our clock has not told the truth since I've been in the village. I wrote about it last week. The sexton's right across the street. Come with me."

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They found Asa busy putting up packages for Bateese to take out. The Elder always did the weighing and was not over-particular to see the beam kick. He hurried over his task and led the way up the hill, explaining the vagaries of the clock as he went along. They climbed the stairs and the ladder to the belfry, where the young man, after a careful examination, said the clock was in bad shape, but could be made to keep good time for about a hundred dollars.

"It's too much!" exclaimed Asa. "The church can't stand no such expense."

"It need n't," declared Gray, much to Crocker's surprise. "I'll pay for it myself."

Such generosity was almost too much for Asa's comprehension, and he was voluble in his expression of gratitude.

"How long will it take you?" asked Gray.

"About a week," answered the young man, "but first you must give me a new platform. This one's loose, and an inch or two out of true. Have you got a good blacksmith in the village?"

"There ain't none better," asserted Asa, anxious to keep all possible cash in Wesley. "Ira Harp's as good a man as you'll find in the Adirondacks or Albany either."

Asa led the way down the hill, followed by the preacher and the clock-man. They came to the blacksmith shop, found their way between the derelict wheels without wagons and wagons without wheels, carriages without tops and tops without carriages. The building was long and low, and on the shingles of its roof was inscribed "Paduca's Panacea" in huge white letters, shaded into orange. The door was wide open, and indeed was never shut except in mid-winter. The small windows

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were so begrimed by smoke and dust that they admitted little light, and the interior was like a cave. The forge stood in the farther end, and Ira worked mainly by the light that came from its flames. The floor was of clay, beaten hard by many feet. Along the left side ran a bench, littered with old horseshoes, nails, straps, bolts, and a non-descript lot of metal pieces. On the right there leaned against the wall wheel tires, whiffle-trees and iron bars, and across the corner stretched a rope on which hung horseshoes of all sizes, bright and shining. Several dilapidated chairs were scattered about, for the use of gossiping owners of horses waiting to be shod, and village loafers without horses.

Ira greeted them cordially. He wore a pair of brown overalls, a shirt of blue gingham open at the throat, and a large leather apron. His face was grimy, his hands and arms blackened by soot and grease, but there was a good-looking, though rather stolid, set of features beneath the dirt, and the eyes were clear and honest. He flushed at the preacher's entrance, for they had not met since he had been called upon to pray at the evening meeting. Ira was shoeing "Daisy," and Mr. Warner, her owner, stood close by him, watching the operation. Ira had Daisy's hoof in his lap, and could only grunt his welcome, as he took the nails from between his teeth, drove them in and clinched them with his hammer.

Gray turned the clock-man over to Ira, and Asa helped him with his advice. There was a broad smile on Mr. Warner's face as he shook hands; indeed, his whole manner had changed. He was quick and eager, and he took the preacher to one side, drew an envelope from his pocket, and said:

"I've got a letter here I want you to read."

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He handed it to Gray, who found its contents were as follows:

Dear Sir: We have a customer who offers \$4 per share for any part of 100 shares of Beaver Creek Mining Company, subject to previous purchase. Wire promptly if you are interested.

"I just got this to-day. I suppose you know a lot about stocks. What do you advise me to do?"

"You must decide that," declared Gray. "I have no idea what the stock is worth. Have you had any other offers for it?"

"No," replied Mr. Warner.

"I should sell it, then," advised the preacher. "You say you need the money."

"But," argued the old man, "it cost me three dollars more than twenty years ago, and think of all the interest I've lost. Perhaps it's worth a heap more. Perhaps they've struck a lot of gold. How'm I goin' to know?"

"I've already talked with David French about this stock of yours, and his agents advise selling."

"I believe I will," said Mr. Warner, with the importance of a large dealer. "I believe I will." Then, suddenly losing something of his confidence, he said: "I never borrowed a cent in my life. Would it be safe for you to loan me thirty dollars to pay what I owe Crocker now? He called out to me this morning as I was passing his store. I felt 'most as if I had stolen the money. Could you give it to me without Asa seeing you?"

"Certainly," replied Gray. "It's a perfectly safe loan, and I'm glad to accommodate you."

They slipped into a dark corner and Warner took the crisp bills in a trembling hand.

When they came back to the forge, Asa was about to leave. Catching sight of Warner, however, he stopped

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and spoke to the old minister in tones audible to every one.

"Look here, Parson, when are you goin' to pay that account of yours? It ain't honest for a preacher to owe money like you owe me."

Asa expected to see the old man cringe. What was his surprise when instead he straightened up before him and cried out: "When am I goin' to pay that account of mine? Now, now, now! This very minute. You've hounded me till I've grown 'most sick with the shame of it. Here's \$30. Your bill's \$28.56. You can keep the change to pay the interest. I don't want to be holden to you for anything."

He pressed the money into Asa's hand, which closed automatically over the cash. When the Elder recovered a little from his surprise, he replied soothingly:

"I s'pose I had a right to ask for what was due me, and I don't see as you have any call to get het up over it. I've always liked to do business with you and I s'pose we'll keep on together."

"No," said the old man, "I'll never enter your store again. Don't send Bateese to my house either. I shall take my trade to Babson after this."

"Just as you say," replied Asa meekly, sad at heart at the loss of a customer to his hated rival in the grocery business. Indeed Crocker was rather frightened by the sudden vehemence of the little man, so long humble and appealing.

Asa took his departure, and, when Daisy was harnessed into the rattling buggy, Mr. Warner drove away. He was going to Babson's to get some good things for Mary. Would n't she be pleased? She did n't believe there could be any real money coming to them.

Left alone with Ira, Gray said: "I'm sorry I troubled

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you last Thursday evening. I did n't know it was hard for you to pray in public."

"Pastor," replied the blacksmith, a grim smile on his face, "I tried my best, and there's no denying I broke all records for a short prayer. 'God be merciful to me a sinner' by the publican is beaten out at last. Don't say a word more. I'd shake hands to show you how friendly I am if they were n't too dirty. Furthermore, ask me to do anything within my power and I'll do it for you."

For a moment it came into Gray's mind to speak of Ira's trouble with his wife, but he decided to wait, and soon after went away. As he left the shop, he turned and looked at the roof, with its staring letters a yard long, and he did not wonder that Mrs. Harp objected to having them constantly before her eyes. He resolved to wait for a good opportunity, however, and to arrange in some way so that these two members of his church should be reconciled.

Mrs. Harp sat in a pew with Mrs. Davis, a woman of middle age, short, stout and pale, with nothing particular about her to interest John Gray. She was on his list, however, as the next person to call upon, and late in the afternoon he decided that he would see her. The address read, "Sawmill Tenement Number 4."

Although a scant half-mile away, the sound of the screaming saws came faintly into the village, the intervening hill deadening the sound. But as Gray began to descend, the shrieks grew louder and louder and more and more demoniac. The tenements were low cottages, painted an ugly red, and there were a half-dozen of them running back from the street. Here and there were patches of green grass, and some of the cottages had window boxes with a few straggling flowers. The Davis cot-

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tage was the most cheerful, and, being at the end of the little street, its back windows looked into a small forest of oaks. When Gray knocked at her door, Mrs. Davis greeted him heartily and gave him a chair by the window. She was plainly dressed, and the room was as neat and clean as a vigorous use of broom and duster could make it. She talked in rather a low voice, which the noise of the saws made it difficult for the preacher to hear. Mrs. Davis had attended every service of the church, but it occurred to the preacher that her husband had not presented himself.

"Is your husband a professing Christian?" he asked.

"Yes, Thomas's been a member for nigh thirty years. He joined the same time I did when we were boy and girl together."

"I hope he will come to church next Sunday. I am sorry not to have seen him yet."

"I suppose you don't know about Thomas, nor why he has n't been to church. He went with me every Sunday until two years ago last spring. Then he had a bad accident driving logs on the river, which laid him up for a long time. His hip was hurt so bad that they said he would never walk again. He did get out after a while and got a job at the sawmill where he did n't have to move round very much. His hip hurts him all the time, and when Sunday comes he don't feel equal to climbing the hill to church. He just rests here in an easy-chair by the window, and I have n't the heart to ask him to stir."

"If he's able to work, he must be able to attend divine worship. I'd very much like to talk with him."

At this moment the shriek of the saws changed to a low moan, and then became silent. There was the short, shrill sound of the mill whistle, and the men came streaming out of the door. Most of them were in their shirt-

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sleeves, or with their coats thrown loosely over their shoulders, and they came hurrying by, spurred by the thought of supper. The clatter of the quick feet had died away when there came the sound of slow footsteps, the tapping of a cane, and Thomas Davis entered. He was a tall, gaunt man, raw-boned and haggard. His face had been bleached by suffering and lined by pain. He came limping in, his hand on his hip, and leaning on a stout stick over which he bent.

"Here's Mr. Gray," announced Mrs. Davis.

"I'm glad to see you, Pastor," said Thomas Davis, extending a hand from which a finger was missing. As he spoke, he stood as erect as his hurt would allow him. Gray had never held a mutilated hand before, and he involuntarily dropped it.

"It does n't feel good, does it, Pastor?" inquired Davis, smiling. "I'd give you the other, but it's worse than the first." He held up a hand on which only the thumb and forefinger remained. "'T would n't look good to pass the plate round Sundays, would it?"

"It's too bad for a man to be hurt like that," declared Gray. "There ought to be a law to stop it, or some kind of machinery to prevent it. Somebody should be punished when a man is mutilated like that."

"Of course," said Davis, "yer can't be quite as ready as with eight fingers and two thumbs, which is what the Lord allows us. I could stand the hands all right if it was n't for my hip. I s'pose you've noticed I have n't been to church, and that's the reason. I could crawl up the hill and down again, but when Saturday night comes, I'm all in, and the rest on Sunday just helps me get up steam enough to last through the week. I read a chapter in the Bible, try to make out what it means, and say a prayer

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the best I can. When Julia here gets home, she tells me about the sermon. She's got a good memory an' I know 'most all you say. I enjoyed your sermon on Gideon, an' p'r'aps sometime I'll get fixed up and will be able to sit in the old pew again."

"Can you get 'fixed up'?" inquired Gray eagerly. The sight of the maimed hands and the thought of long hours of labor in constant suffering gave the preacher a sensation of physical pain.

"Well, Preacher, it's like this. When I got hurt, I was 'way up in the woods an' the only help I got was from a man who thinks he's a good doctor for cattle. He never claimed to be a surgeon, but he did his best for me, which was n't much. If I'd had a good surgeon, at the time, I'd have been as well as ever in a month or two. As it is now, I've got to get a fancy man an' that costs money. They don't give a wreck like me full pay, but I get enough so I'm savin' up all the time, an' by next spring I expect to go to Albany an' come back as good as ever."

"If it's only lack of money that keeps you here, that can be fixed up right away," declared Gray impetuously. "How much do you need?"

"The old stocking lacks about a hundred dollars," said Davis, "an' though I'm much obliged to you, I propose to get that cash myself."

"Let me loan it to you, then," insisted Gray.

"What interest do you want?" asked Davis.

"Interest?" exclaimed Gray. "Interest! I would n't take a cent from you. How could I? I'll let you have the money and you'll pay me back when it's convenient."

"No, Preacher, I can't take money from you in that way. I've got just pride enough to refuse to take a gift from any one. If you care to loan me that hundred dollars

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at six per cent interest and think it would be a good investment, I'll take it. I really don't think there's much risk. I've got a steady job and I'll gain all the extra pay that'll come to me when I get so I can move round smart again. Of course, I should be laid up about two months, when I shan't be earning anything, and that's what I really want your hundred dollars for."

"If you insist that you'll only take the money that way," declared the preacher, "I'll have to agree to it, and I'll bring you a check to-morrow morning. It's really selfish of me, for I want to have you in my congregation, and one condition of the bargain is that you come to church and hear me preach."

"All right, Pastor, it looks as if the bargain was made, and it'll be mighty easy for me to keep the church-going part when I'm patched up. Won't you sit down and have some supper with us? It won't take Julia very long to get something ready."

"Thank you," replied Gray, "but I'll come some other time. I'm under orders from Linda. I'm late now, and she might leave me altogether if I should stay away without telling her."

He bade them both "Good-bye," and, when Davis gave him his maimed hand in parting, he gripped it heartily. As he walked home he realized that Thomas Davis was as much a hero as many a man who by a single act has the Victoria Cross pinned to his breast.

As he passed the Frazer cottage, he noticed a handkerchief lying on the gravel walk just inside the gate. He picked it up and was about to take it in to the house, when he heard his supper-bell ring and saw Linda in the doorway. He put the handkerchief in his pocket, hurried home, and not until he had finished supper and was comfortably

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seated in his study before the fire did he examine his prize. It was a little square of white linen in the corner of which was the monogram "A. H." It had a strange fascination for him. It was so intimate that it seemed to have become impregnated by the personality of its owner. The faint fragrance carried Gray back to the morning in the studio when he had held Alice Hale for a moment in his arms.

How long ago it seemed! What a fool he had been! How strangely this girl had come into his life! But he did not realize how she was creeping into his heart and taking possession of his thoughts. He put the handkerchief into a little drawer in his desk and turned the lock on it.

CHAPTER XV

HIS dreams were disturbed by a most discordant medley of sounds, over which Cæsar's squawks rose triumphant, although the voice of Linda was not wholly subdued. Gray slipped into his bathrobe and hurrying downstairs found his study like a battle-ground after the struggle is over.

Linda explained that, in order to air the room, she had left the window open under Cæsar's cage, and, hurrying back had found the "Maltee" cat clinging to the bars and clawing at the bird, whose sharp beak was defending the attack on his stronghold. At Linda's entrance the cat had retreated hastily, and as far as she could see Cæsar had not been hurt. There were a few loose green feathers on the floor, some fragments of fur, and Cæsar's beak was tinged by the blood of his enemy. Apparently the victory was the parrot's, and he certainly claimed it by his cries of triumph and proud flapping of wings.

After breakfast the preacher resolved to return the handkerchief and, taking it from the drawer, he went over to the Frazer cottage. As he approached the big door of the studio, he was surprised to find Faith and Alice giving first aid to the "Maltee" cat.

"See what some brute has done to this poor cat!" exclaimed Alice. "It looks as if he had tried to kill him with a pitchfork." She pointed to several deep wounds, while the Peri, who reposed in Faith's arms, made a vain effort to escape from what he knew was an unfriendly presence.

"I don't know a man in the village who could have been so cruel," declared Faith.

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"It might have been Tom Lunn," suggested Alice. "You know how he lit the fire under the horse. Faith took pity on this poor cat and has been mothering it until it was almost handsome. Look at the poor thing now!"

"Yes," replied Gray, "Jude told me about Tom. But you must n't blame him for this, nor be too sympathetic with the cat."

"How too sympathetic?" inquired Alice indignantly.

"Because you are harboring an intended murderer, an assassin whose injuries were received in an attack on the life of my parrot."

"And did he succeed?" asked Alice. "He would have few mourners. His awful voice has almost driven me mad."

"No," answered Gray, "Cæsar seems as well as ever."

"Are you sure the cat is guilty?" asked Faith.

"There's the proof," said Gray, pointing to a fragment of green feather caught between the cat's claws.

At this moment either the cat became conscious that his guilt was proved, or Faith's arms relaxed at the recognition of her pet's guilt, for he gave a quick spring and disappeared in the recesses of the woodpile close at hand.

"I suppose he did n't know any better," explained Faith. "It's natural for a cat to look on all birds as his prey."

"Yes," agreed Gray, smiling, "but it might have been a thrush."

To this Alice made no reply, though she colored at the reference, and Gray took his departure pleased that he scored a point with her. He forgot all about the handkerchief until he was back in his study, and again and again during the day he took it from his pocket and inhaled its fragrance.

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On Sunday morning John Gray had given this notice: "I shall be at home every Wednesday evening from 7.30 to 9 o'clock, and shall be glad to see any one in trouble or in need of religious advice."

Elder Crocker shook his head at this, for it was something new, and in his mind all new things were wrong, or at least wrong "till proved innocent." Deacon Harding, by the expression of his face, at least withheld his approval, and Abby Green declared to Mrs. Belcher on her way out of church, "It sounds too much to me like a 'confessional,' for a regeler Metherdist church."

No complaint or protest was made, however, and on Wednesday morning Gray awoke quite unconscious of the opposition to his plan. Half-past seven found him in his study at his desk, with Maud Green his first caller. In fact, Maud was five minutes ahead of the appointed time. She had taken great pains with her toilet and was redolent of "Wayside Violet," Crocker's best perfume, which she had obtained with much difficulty, as her aunt's account was badly in arrears. When she gave her hand to the preacher, she "allowed it to linger in his grasp," as she had read in a novel only that afternoon, and she opened the conversation by saying:

"I'm in great trouble, Pastor, as to what I ought to do about a gentleman to whom I'm 'most the same as engaged. He's proposed to me a lot o' times, an' I finally said 'Yes,' but he's never given me a ring, although he showed me one once that he took from a jeweler down to The Falls as a sample. The stone was n't very big, but he said 't was a real diamond. His name is Redny Feathers, an' he's a commercial traveler. He's got a good business all through this part of the State, gets a fine salary, and is able to support a wife. He supplies Elder Crocker with

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'most everything in his line, an' comes to Wesley oftener than he ought to so's to see me. He's not a professin' Christian. Do you think I ought to marry him?'

To tell the truth, John Gray was puzzled as well as surprised at this, the first problem presented to him, and he realized how poorly qualified he was to give advice on a matter of the heart. He remembered Feathers as the young man with the red hair and the hot temper who had been with Jude when Impatience balked at the bottom of the hill. He also remembered that Mr. Feathers's language when his box was being ground against the wall was not such as would pass muster at a meeting of the Epworth League. He hesitated for a moment, and then said:

"This is a matter about which I am reluctant to advise. I certainly have had no personal experience in an affair like this. In Second Corinthians Paul says, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.' But Paul was an extremist in these things; his position concerning marriage being prejudiced, if not illogical. Is Mr. Feathers a young man of good character and steady habits?"

"That's another thing that troubles me," replied Maud. "He's never got in any real trouble, but he's been talked about. Of course, travelin' round from place to place, an' meetin' all kinds of people, a 'drummer' has to do some things he don't like to do so as to get trade. Redny admits he drinks — but only a little, just so as to be friendly with his customers an' make them 'loosen up.' But he says he don't like the stuff, an' would n't touch it if 't was n't for business reasons. He sometimes plays cards for money, but lots of his customers get real friendly over a game of poker. He dances, too, but he says this is for the sake o' trade, an' that it helps him a

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lot if he's pleasant with the daughters of folks he's sellin' to. He says he'll give all these things up if I'll marry him."

"I should suggest that you ask him to make this reformation before you marry him," advised the preacher, feeling himself on firm ground for the moment.

"But, you see," argued Maud, "I could n't get him to give up these things unless I gave him my promise. Some girls don't think anything of gettin' engaged, but I suppose it's a promise one ought to keep just the same as any other."

"I am not sure but what it is even more solemn than most promises, and with less excuse for carelessness. You should, of course, do all you can to lead Mr. Feathers in the right path. Paul also says, 'The unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife,' and in another passage, 'For what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband?'" Gray hesitated for a moment and then asked, "Do you — love this young man?"

At this question Maud tried to blush, and succeeded in simpering: "I like him better than any one I know — well. He's been good to me, and given me lots of presents, some of them expensive ones. I thought I loved him, but lately I'm gettin' doubtful. I've had lots of attention, an' most every time, when I came to know the man real well, I did n't want to marry him. Since I've listened to your preachin', I've come to be more 'n' more doubtful about Redny — I mean Mr. Feathers. An' I think I ought to give myself to a different kind of man."

"I was not aware," said the preacher, "that I had said anything in my sermons concerning marriage. It is one of the last subjects upon which I should choose to speak. Even now I can talk to you only in the most general way."

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"It was n't what you said, Pastor, but 't was the high ideals you set for us folks in Wesley. It made me feel that I ought to look higher."

John Gray had been in troubled waters from the very beginning of the interview, and, wishing to bring it to a close, he said, "You must pray for guidance, and I shall be glad to help you in any way I can."

"Thank you, Pastor," said Maud, rising reluctantly. "You have helped me very much, and I've so enjoyed talkin' with you." She stood for a moment facing the preacher, balancing uncomfortably, first on one foot and then the other, went as far as the door, then turned and said hurriedly, "Here's a little something I brought you 'as a free-will offering.' I hope you'll like them. I did them all myself. Good-night." She handed the minister a brown-paper parcel tied with pink string, and took her departure.

Gray put the package on his desk and, opening it, found a pair of slippers, worked in pink worsted, with forget-me-nots decorating the toes. They were plainly too large for him; he did not care for worsted slippers, and he did not like gifts of any kind, but he reproached himself for his lack of sympathy, and put them on a chair by his side as the bell rang.

It was Jude, very penitent, very apologetic, very hopeful, very lovable. He told how hard he had tried, how faithfully he had prayed.

"I tell you, Pastor, I'd have won out but for one little thing. It seems as if there's always something comin' up to trip a man tryin' to do right. I was so anxious to keep straight that I decided I'd go to bed with just a cold pick-up, an' not have my usual hot supper at the hotel. I thought I'd try 'safety first.' I was just goin' up the stairs

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to my room in the stable, when Pasco called me into his room to tell me about a salve for Impatience's shoulder. She's always gettin' the skin off of her somehow. It happened that Pasco was takin' a drink o' whiskey, an' he offered me some. 'T was the first time he'd ever done it, for Pasco's ag'in' any one but him drinkin' in the stable. His orders are awful strict. Well, there was Pasco's kindness, hard to refuse, and the smell an' the sight o' the whiskey. Honest, Preacher, at the very moment I was prayin' to be delivered from temptation that whiskey was runnin' down my throat. Then it was all over with me. I went hot-foot to the Club, an' not havin' eaten much of anything, the whiskey workin' on an empty stomach knocked me out completely. I remember thinkin' I must go an' apologize to you. Strange what a fool a drunk man is. It's lucky you were n't pulled out o' bed 'bout midnight to hear my apologies. I come to the lilac bush, got mixed up in it, stumbled an' fell. The grass felt awful good an' soft. In half a minute I was asleep, an' I never knew a thing till I woke up on the lounge in your room. How did I ever get there?"

"I carried you."

"Up them steep steps an' narrer stairs! Me weighin' 'bout a ton. How did you do it? What did you do it for?"

"First, because I did not want you to be disgraced, and, second, because I did not want to be put to shame."

"What do you mean, Pastor?"

"Don't you see, Jude, that when I gave the casting vote that kept you in the church I became responsible for you? It was my judgment against that of Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker. I believed that you were man enough to make good. If you had been found drunk, how

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Asa would have laughed at both of us. We're in the same boat, Jude."

"My God!" cried Jude, rising to his feet, and holding out his big hand. "My God! Preacher, you'll never be put to shame by me. I'll keep straight for your sake if not for my own."

They shook hands across the desk, the young minister, clean-cut, earnest, almost ascetic, and the middle-aged man, round-shouldered, awkward and homely, who had struggled long and vainly against an hereditary weakness. Yet they were alike in their sincerity and their desire for goodness.

When Jude left, it was agreed that on the Saturday night he should eat a cold supper on the stage as he drove home from the Junction; that he should then go to his room, and if he found temptation assailing him too strongly, he should come straight to the parsonage, where there was to be a meeting of the Board. Gray promised to leave the meeting at any moment to help Jude fight his enemy. When the latter left, he was very hopeful, very sanguine. He had unbosomed himself to the preacher; he had told how ashamed he was to have Faith and Alice know of his weakness; how much he cared for them both.

"I feel as if Faith was my own little girl instead of belonging to the Deacon, and Alice is the biggest-hearted an' the levellest-headed person in all Wesley, barrin' you, of course, bein' a preacher."

"I'm not so sure that you need make an exception in my case," interrupted Gray. "There's one thing I'm sure of, however, and that is, I have learned something since I came to Wesley and I mean to learn more. Miss Hale has been one of my teachers and you have been another."

"Sho! Pastor. I could n't learn anybody nothin', not

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to say a man with a college education that can speak Greek an' Latin just as easy as I can say 'Huddup' to my team. You've helped me a lot to-night, particerlarly when you told me how you'd backed me an' I must n't let you down. An' ag'in when you reminded me how Asa will go crowin' round the place if I don't make good. We'll show Asa," were his last words, as he went out.

There was a full half-hour of solitude for John Gray, and then Linda admitted Mrs. Harp. The preacher noticed the touch of color in her pale cheeks and the nervous movement of her hands as she took her seat.

"What can I do to help you?" he asked.

Mrs. Harp clasped and unclasped her fingers. Twice she started to speak and bit her lips to keep them from trembling.

"Have you ever seen two folks with their elbows on the table take hold of each other's hands an' press until one bends an' gives way?"

"No," replied the preacher.

"The men-folks do it often, and that's me an' Ira. Do you know what it means for a man an' woman to fight against each other for years an' years without strikin' a blow, or hardly ever usin' a cross word?"

Gray shook his head. "Tell me about it."

"I've got to tell some one or go crazy. I'd rather talk to you, because you're not prejudiced an' spiteful, like the village folks. You don't know anything about these things an' I would n't wonder if you could help me more than if you did."

"I'll be glad to listen, anyway, and will help you if I can."

"When Ira an' I married, we were fond of each other. I was pretty then, some thought the prettiest of all the

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girls. Ira was steady, strong, an' had a payin' business. It looked like a good match, but it was n't. I don't suppose you could find two decent people in the State less likely to be happy together than me an' Ira. Before we married, while he did n't care much to go around nor for dress, he kept himself lookin' fine, an' drove me around most every pleasant evening. He did this to please me an' to get me, an' I don't blame him. I did all I could to make him think me pleasant an' easy to get along with.

"When we settled down, 't was different. I had my new clothes an' wanted to show them. I wanted to go out evenings, same as before, to take in the church sociables, the concerts, an' the lectures. I wanted to be driven over to the Falls once in a while to do some shopping. I wanted to have folks to supper an' to spend the evening. Ira did n't care for any of these things. When night came, he said he was tired. He fell asleep in his chair, an' once he went off at a lecture an' snored, an' made me dreadful ashamed of him. Once, when some folks came in, he went to bed, leaving me to entertain them. He got careless how he dressed, eat his dinner in his shirt-sleeves, an' went without a collar. I wanted new furniture, an' he said what we had was good enough. He wore his old clothes until they were shabby, an' would not give me a seal-skin sack I wanted. He said my cloth one would do. He was n't stingy, for if he thought I really needed anything he gave it to me, an' he never stinted me on money at the grocery store. Worst of all, instead of shaving every day the way he started, he went to every second day an' sometimes only twice a week. All this does n't seem very bad, does it?" she asked.

"He was never cross to you?"

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"Never," she replied "not one single time. Don't you see how dreadful it was?"

John Gray really did not understand, but he listened as she continued:

"Even when I wanted him to be angry, he would never quarrel with me. He said he 'did n't like things,' he said they 'were n't worth while,' he said they 'were n't sensible,' an' he was almost always right. He said collars were useless, that when he was sleepy he would go to bed, that he did n't care to dress for show, or what people thought of us if we were all right. Every single question he looked at as if it was a horse to be shod, an' he fitted a shoe to it. In all these years he's hardly ever done a really foolish thing."

This was all very strange to the preacher, although he vaguely understood the experience of this nervous woman and her conflict with her phlegmatic husband.

"Did you give in to him in these things?" he asked.

"I did not," she replied vehemently. "I argued that a sealskin sack cost more than a cloth one, but would last longer, look better, an' be cheaper in the end. I went an' bought it with my own money, 'spite of what Ira said. It was out of style the next season. I wore it four years, until I was sick to death of the sight of it, an' even then I was out of pocket. He was right an' I was wrong, but I had the sealskin sack. Don't you think every one ought to make a mistake once in a while?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," replied the preacher.

"Why, it's like this. Would n't you rather sometime get off the track in a new country than drive along the ruts in the same old road, year after year?"

"Yes, I think I would. I see what you mean."

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"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Mrs. Harp. "I don't s'pose there's any one else in Wesley but you that would understand, an' I can't tell you how it's helped me to just unload my feelings on some one. Well, it went on like this year after year. We never quarreled in public, an' Ira never even at home. Once in a while I got real mad an' acted like a fool. After I'd broke out, I felt better an' was comfortable for a while."

"Was Ira 'close' with you?"

"Never, when he thought a thing was needed. He always wanted me to get things of good quality. No, Pastor, Ira were n't never mean with me. The years went by, always the pressure of his will against mine, an' mine against his, until it came to the sign on the blacksmith shop. You've been told about that?"

"Yes."

"Of course, it's a village joke. Ira told me he was offered ten dollars to have 'Paduca's Panacea' painted on the roof. I said I would n't have it staring into our front windows for a hundred dollars. Then he began to argue. He said the shop was an old shack, an' that a few letters would not make it any uglier than it was. I think he would have given it up if I had n't got mad an' threatened. I said, 'Ira Harp, if you have that sign on the roof, I will not speak a word to you as long as it stays.' This was enough for Ira, an' he had it painted the very next day. This was 'most a year ago, an' not a word have we spoken since then. I moved my things into the back bedroom, where I could not see the sign, an' left the front room to him, an' I live in the kitchen, giving him the sitting-room. I cook for two people, but we eat alone. I s'pose you've noticed how we sit separate at church. Of course, it's been trying, an' sometimes it's awful. I have to watch

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myself every minute for fear I'll forget an' speak. All the time I've been hating Ira, an' was never really sorry for him until you called on him to pray last Thursday night. Funny, was n't it? that such a little thing should take hold of me so. When I saw him on his feet, so awkward an' miserable, there suddenly came over me a feeling that I don't understand. I wanted to help him, but of course I could n't, an' I went home an' cried half the night. What do you suppose it was?" Mrs. Harp asked this question with wonder in her voice and eyes.

"I cannot tell," replied Gray; and then, after a little silence: "You don't suppose you really love him, after all?"

At this question Mrs. Harp gave a little gasp, and a wave of color swept into her pale cheeks that made her beautiful, much as she must have been in the old days when she was the "prettiest girl in Wesley." She covered her face with her hands, and for a moment again there was silence. When she revealed her face again, however, the set look had come back, and she said:

"Whether I love him or not, until he takes that sign off the roof I shall not speak to him." She rose to her feet, said, "Good-night, Pastor; thank you for listening to my troubles," and went out.

For a long time John Gray sat at his desk, thinking hard. Domestic infelicities and conflicts of will between husband and wife were phenomena which he found curious and interesting. He remembered Jude's conversation as he drove over to Wesley from the Junction: "Did it ever occur to you how much matchin' horses is like matrimony?" Gray was conscious that he had learned many new things that evening, and that his education was being broadened in many ways by his experience with the people of Wesley.

CHAPTER XVI

THE pastor was raking up the leaves in front of his house, when Jude drove up, and, after a cheerful "Good-morning," said:

"Preacher, you must be careful not to overdo. You're likely to strain yourself with that rake, for you're not used to hard work."

"I don't think I'm in much danger, Jude," replied the minister, continuing to ply his rake.

"Well, I forgot to tell you last night that there was four cases of books at the Junction. I had n't room for them yesterday, but am planning to bring them over this afternoon. Would n't you like to drive over with me, an' look after your property? I'm awful careless. It won't cost you nuthin' for the drive."

"I ought not to go," replied the minister. "I have a great many things I ought to attend to here."

"Well, jest neglect them," advised Jude. "Don't do your duty for once, an' have somethin' to repent of. If you don't look out an' make some mistakes, you'll be in danger of gettin' self-righteous, an' that's terrible. It's 'bout the only thing that's bad I ain't in no danger of catchin'."

The result was that five minutes later Gray found himself on the front seat of the stage by the side of Jude. There was nothing else in the rattling vehicle but a few boxes, and, when they reached the open country and an up-grade, Jude as usual began to talk.

"Did it ever occur to you how like humans hosses are? We've got an old plug at the stable that reminds me of

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Asa every time I look at him. His disposition's like Asa's, too. He's got a long neck an' he tries to reach over an' steal the hay in the next stall. This pair of hosses are clean ringers for Ira an' Betsy Harp. Patience there is Ira, steady, ploddin', no style, an' no ambition. The only difference is that Ira's not lazy. Betsy's 'bout as nigh like Impatience as a woman can be to a hoss. She wants to make a good impression, carries her head up, an' steps high. Don't want nuthin' to pass her. When Ira comes home from the shop, half washes himself, an' sets down to supper in his shirt-sleeves an' no collar, it just hurts Betsy. If I had my way, I'd separate this pair, although I'd have to hunt a long while to find anything to mate with Impatience, an', if I had the right, I'd separate Ira an' Betsy. Fact is, they've separated themselves already."

"You believe in divorce on no other ground than incompatibility?" asked Gray, smiling.

"Sure," replied Jude; "an' as for keepin' a nice, delicate woman tied up to a drunken brute of a man what abuses her, it's just awful. For a good man to be bound to support a woman runnin' round after other men is almost as bad — not quite, p'r'aps, but almost. Speakin' o' drunken brutes, I don't put myself in that class. I get drunk, or rather, I have been gettin' drunk once a week, but I wa'n't no brute, an' I never abused no one, man, woman, child, or beast."

Here Jude paused for a moment and halted his team to take in a basket of eggs from a farmer's wife, who stood in front of her gate. "Well, Mis' Simmons, what shall I do with the chickens that hatch out before I reach the Junction?"

"You can have them all, Jude," replied the woman;

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"them eggs is fresh an' they won't turn to chickens until you hand 'em in to the store."

"Well," remarked Jude, "I never had no chickens hatch out on me, but once I made an omelet of a basket just like yours. Put 'em down careful, right here between these two boxes, where nuthin' can't fall on 'em. How's Ben's rheumatism? No better? That's too bad. There's a man over to the Junction says he cured his with rosen. I'll bring a piece with me this afternoon, an' he can try it. Good-mornin', hope he'll be better soon."

Jude snapped his whip against Patience's tough hide, and they were off again. Jude's next topic of conversation was old age and its infirmities.

"I don't s'pose, Preacher, that you ever think 'bout growin' old. Folks don't usually till they git to be 'bout fifty, goin' down the 'westerin' slope,' as Deacon Harding calls it in his prayers. The fust time I noticed it was when I brushed my hair one day, and found a bunch o' white ones creepin' in. I forgot about that, but not long after I got a glimpse o' the back of my head in a mirror an' saw the bald place comin'. I was in Glens Falls, an' Fred Miller was payin' for a five-dollar hat he'd lost to me in a 'lection bet. It wa'n't a real bet, for I did n't stand to lose nuthin'. Fred Miller was runnin' for the Assembly, an' bet me the hat he'd be 'lected. If he won, I got a hat, an' if he lost, I just failed to git it. Nuthin' wrong in that, was there?"

"Why, no," replied the preacher, "not unless you voted for him, or got others to do so for the sake of the hat. To tell the truth, I'm a little doubtful about it."

"Well, Preacher, it was like this. I preferred Fred to the other feller, an' would have voted for him anyway, but I admit I did some work gettin' others to the polls, which

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I might not 'a' done if it had n't been for the hat. I'm inclined to think I did wrong. I usually find, if I think long enough 'bout anythin', that the best things I do have somethin' wrong about 'em, an' the wust some redeemin' quality."

"Self-analysis," declared Gray, "is very difficult, and sometimes not even helpful. Come to think of it, I don't believe I have ever really thought of growing old."

"When you git a little older, there's lots o' things that give a jog to your elbow. When Asa got run over in Albany by a team he thought ought to have stopped an' given him the right of way, but did n't, he was taken to the hospital. The paper next day said, 'The venerable gentleman was badly bruised, but no bones were broken.' Now, Asa's only three or four years older than me, an' they called him 'the venerable gentleman.' I hoped that he was no more venerable than he was a gentleman, which would have let me out, but I could n't forget the name. Do you know the only way you can escape growin' old?"

"Tell me how," asked Gray.

"Why, just by dyin' young, an' that's wuss," replied Jude, laughing; "so I don't lose my appetite when I see my hair gettin' thinner an' thinner all the time. Some folks don't want to grow old an' don't want to live at all. They just want to die. Have you seen Mrs. French lately?"

"No," replied the preacher; "I called the day after my arrival. Is she worse?"

"I hear she is," replied Jude. "They say her sufferin's are somethin' awful. Is it wrong to want to die if you 're in dreadful pain every minute, an' there's no chance o' your gettin' well? You know, Preacher, if an animal gits hurt bad an' can't be cured, they just put it out of its misery. I

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s'pose 't would be wrong to treat a human that way, but, if I was like Mrs. French, I'd ask to have somethin' put on my tongue that would make me sleep sound."

When they reached the Junction, they rattled gayly by the scattered houses, for even Patience was eager for his oats. The minister got his dinner at the Valley House, but Jude had a lot of errands and Impatience had a loose shoe, so he was forced to satisfy his appetite with a sandwich and a piece of pie. One of the boxes of books had been broken, and this Jude fixed with hammer and nails borrowed from the station-master.

The boxes were strapped on to the back of the stage when the train came in. Gray sat on the front seat and watched the same scene he had beheld only a few days before. There were the same old men smoking contemplative pipes, the same barefooted boys, dogs, and village maidens on the hunt for susceptible drummers.

The point of view was different, however, for now he was a part of the performance. There was another variation also, for in place of Redny Feathers, the first one to emerge from the train was Alice Hale. She was dressed in a dark-blue gown and her hair was done up under a stylish little toque. Altogether she had quite a citified air about her as she descended from the car and gave her dress-suit case to Jude.

For a moment Gray was too surprised to move, and he seemed to be copying Redny's attempt to monopolize the front seat when Jude came up with his passenger and said cheerfully:

"Here's the preacher, Alice, come to welcome you back to Wesley. When he heard you was comin' home on this train, he insisted on drivin' over to meet you."

Before Gray could speak, Alice, looking up with a

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twinkle in her eye and a smile in the corner of her mouth, took up Jude's lead with "That was good of him." At this Gray colored, and was about to reply, when Alice interrupted by, "If it is n't true, don't deny it. I've been to see the picture dealers and I'm very low in my mind."

By this time the preacher had recovered his composure and, descending quickly from his seat, said, "I'm very sure of one thing, and that is, whom Jude will choose to sit with him to-day."

"That's gallant of you," remarked Alice, "but should n't the church come first? What do you think, Jude?"

"I'd like to have you both. It's a pity the seat won't hold three."

Gray helped Alice climb on to the stage, he ascending into the shadows of the back seat, and Jude took the reins in his hands and, with a cheerful "Huddup, Lightnin'," and a loud snap of his whip on Patience, they started for home. They rattled down the hill, and Jude as usual took advantage of the first up-grade to talk.

"Well, what's the news in the big city? Did you have a good time?"

"I went for business, not pleasure."

"Did you do any?" asked Jude. "Did you sell a picture? If you did, I want you to settle and pay me what you owe me."

Jude made this demand as if he was an "importunate creditor," and Alice smiled up at him and said, "I owe you more than I can ever pay." She tapped the red hand that held the reins with her gloved finger. It was a caressing touch and Gray noticed it and the tender tone in which she spoke. What a puzzle she was! He could not understand her. From the shadows where he sat, Jude and

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Alice in the sunlight were as plainly visible as if the spotlight of the theater had been turned on them. He noticed the round whiteness of Alice's neck, the tendrils of hair that had escaped from bondage, and when she turned to Jude there was the perfect profile against the blue sky. "I met the man who bought my little picture of Granny Jenks's cottage. It is Mr. Brown, the famous collector. He asked me to let him see the next canvas I finished and praised my work. I don't suppose it will come to anything."

"Of course it will," asserted Jude sanguinely. "The time will come when I shall be boastin' how I drove the famous artist in my chariot an' even talked with her, although she's forgotten all about me."

"Never, Jude!"

"It's wonderful to succeed," declared Jude wistfully. "It's wonderful to be doin' something that you can do better than other folks. I s'pose you've a callin' to be a painter an' Mr. Gray to be a preacher. I never had a call to drive stage, an', if I hold my job down an' get my pay envelope on Saturday night, it's all I can expect."

"But you're the best stage-driver in the world," declared Alice, "the very best. I'm not sure yet that I've a call to be a painter."

"I suppose every one has doubts about their call at times," said Gray, "even ministers."

"There's no doubt about your call," asserted Jude, turning round to look at the minister. "Did you ever hear how Jared Small on the mountain had a call?"

"No," replied Gray. "Tell me about it."

"Well, it was like this," began Jude. "O' course you know the Presidin' Elder."

"Yes," replied Gray, "very well."

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"'Twas 'bout a dozen years ago that he come to Wesley on some church business, an' Jared drove down from the mountain to see him. 'I've had a call to the ministry,' said Jared. 'How do you know?' asked the Elder, for Jared was dressed like a scarecrow, with a week's beard on his face, for 't was a Saturday an' he shaved only on Sunday mornin'. Besides this, he stammered, an' at school he'd never gone beyond the third reader. 'Why,' said Jared, 'I'm sure of it, for three nights runnin' I've seen the letters "P. C." in the sky, made by the stars.' 'And what do you think they mean?' asked the Elder. 'Why, "Preach Christ," o' course,' answered Jared. 'No, brother,' replied the Elder, 'you're mistaken. The "P. C." does n't mean "preach Christ," but "Plant Corn."'"

John Gray was not given to hilarity, but there was something about the story, and more in the way Jude told it, that appealed to his sense of humor, and he broke into laughter so hearty that both Jude and Alice turned to look at him. It was a John Gray they had never seen before, no longer sedate, serene, and dignified, but a young man natural and buoyant.

"What did Jared do?" he inquired, controlling his mirth.

"Why, Jared took it all right," answered Jude. "He'd been tryin' to raise potatoes on some light land for ten years an' had grown 'bout a bushel to the acre; just got his seed back each autumn. He took the Elder's advice, planted corn, raised good crops, an' comes to church every Sunday with his five children, drivin', rain or shine, over eight miles of mountain road."

"It sounds like the Elder," declared Gray. "Perhaps he ought to have told me what he did Jared."

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"No," said Alice. "I'm not a church member, and I suppose I have no right to judge, but I think you had a call."

She said this quite seriously, and Gray felt strangely pleased and elated. Then, realizing his gratification, he took himself to task for placing such value on her words. Had she not mocked him and made him ridiculous only a few days ago?

"Well, called or not, I'm a stage-driver," said Jude philosophically, "an' unless I use the gad on Patience we won't reach Wesley before sundown."

So they rattled on until they were nearly to the village, and the preacher said, "You can leave me at Mrs. French's house. I'm sure I ought to see her."

"We'll be there in a minute," declared Jude, "if Imp don't balk. If she does, we'll be anywhere from fifteen minutes to a full hour. I've studied her for a long time, an' she fools me. She takes the hill all right 'bout four out of five times, p'r'aps this is the fifth."

As he spoke, Imp suddenly put her ears back and stopped.

"You have n't any idea how long she'll wait?" asked Gray.

"Not the least," replied Jude. "The Lord only knows an' He won't tell. Her record is one hour an' thirty minutes. It so happened that Asa was with me, too. You ought to have heard him. 'T was rainin' hard, an' he did n't have no umbrella or he'd have left us inside o' thirty seconds. What made it wuss, 't was the same hoss he'd lied about an' cheated me with. Though p'r'aps 't ain't quite kerrect to say 'cheated.' You see, I won't deny that I knew she balked, but I'd had pretty good luck with balky horses, an' thought I could cure her with kindness."

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Besides, I had a hoss that was so lame that I knew nuthin' could cure her, except 't was a miracle. The Elder never got a day's work out o' my hoss. I've got several hundred out o' Impatience, but she's tried my temper so much I'm not sure who got the best o' the bargain."

"It was dishonest, Jude."

"Yes, Preacher, I s'pose it was; but," continued Jude, a sly twinkle in his eye, "'t was a hoss trade."

"You ought to be ashamed of it, Jude, and a horse trade is no excuse for dishonesty. I'm particular as to the society I keep, and as a sign of my disapproval, I'm going to leave you right here."

"That's awful, Preacher. I do feel in disgrace."

"I'll stick to Jude," said Alice.

"I cannot wait any longer, for the church sociable comes to-night, and I want to call on Mrs. French first," declared Gray.

The preacher had one foot on the step, when Impatience gave a snort and went jerking up the hill, dragging the stage and lazy Patience with her. Indeed, it was with some difficulty that Jude pulled her up before Mrs. French's gate. The preacher climbed down, thanking Jude for his drive and catching a glance from Alice which he could not understand.

When he rang the bell, the house was very still, and he was kept waiting several minutes in the hall before he was allowed to enter Mrs. French's room. He found her propped up in bed, and he was shocked to see the ravages disease had made in the short time that had elapsed between his visits. Her face was drawn and haggard, and in her eyes was a hopeless appeal. Her effort to hide her suffering and to appear cheerful was sad beyond expression.

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"I'm very glad you've come to me, Mr. Gray," she said. "I hated to send for you, for I knew it would sadden you to see me, but I'm very glad you've come."

Gray took her hand and tried to speak, but could not for the lump in his throat.

"I want to talk with you about David," she said, in a low voice and with an effort. "Something serious is troubling him, something more than my suffering. He won't tell, for fear it will grieve me, and I'm sure it is not best for me to force his confidence. It cannot be anything very bad, but he's not at peace with God. I want you to promise to help him when I'm gone."

"I promise you," declared Gray solemnly. "He seems almost to shun me, but I will wait my time and do all I can."

"I cannot tell you how much better I feel for having spoken and received your promise. Now read the last chapter of Revelation to me."

As she spoke, she closed her eyes, and Gray, taking the Bible from a table by the bedside, read the wonderful words which have comforted so many weary souls. He read slowly and with a voice at first low and trembling, but growing firmer as he spoke. Then he knelt and said a few words of prayer, her cold hand in his warm palm. When he rose, the tears were in his eyes, and she was the comforter.

"Don't be sorry for me, dear boy," she said, "and don't think of me as dying or dead. I would rather you did n't come to see me again. Go on with your work; trust in God, help my poor boy, and when the first arbutus blooms next spring, think of me. I'm sure I shall find the arbutus blossoming in heaven."

CHAPTER XVII

It was very difficult for the minister to turn his mind to the gayeties of the "sociable" after his call on Mrs. French. He sat in his study and did not move until Linda insisted, "Yer got to go this minute; they're waitin' for yer now, an' there'll be an awful row if yer ain't there." Linda made this announcement from the front door, with her hat on her head and her cloak on her shoulders, and then disappeared. She wore her Sunday gown, and there was no visible change in her apparel. But an intangible something indicated that Linda was "on gayety bent." John Gray could not tell the reason, which was simply that Linda had — crimped her hair.

When the preacher entered the room, it was well filled, for a sociable was an occasion in Wesley, and members of the congregation were allowed to bring friends if they chose. Neither was there any age limit, and there was a gap of eighty years between Crocker's old uncle, the Christian Socialist, and little Molly Belcher. Molly greeted the preacher rapturously with a hug and kiss, accompanied by the fragrant incense of hot coffee.

"Did you come to hear me speak my piece?" she asked, putting her hand in his.

Before he could answer, Crocker came up, a look of reproach on his long face. "You're late, Pastor," he announced, pushing his way through the crowd. "Here's the list of exercises, come right along." And, handing Gray a sheet of paper, he ploughed his way toward the platform, giving the minister no opportunity to speak with any one as he passed.

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The church sociable was always held in the basement of the church, back of which was a small room which contained a large sheet-iron stove. The Ladies' Aid Society presided over the performance. With dresses covered with large white aprons, they brewed tall pots of tea and coffee and made gallons of oyster stew in a shining tin wash-boiler. From this rose a cloud of steam, and from it whiffs of savory odor drifted out into the larger room. A few oysters were reserved for those of the men who preferred a plate of "raws," which were eaten deluged with salt and pepper and vinegar. There were two long tables, heaped with plates of biscuit and brown bread, and pans of baked beans, surrounded by pickles, tomatoes, and beets. At intervals frosted cakes rose from the tables like miniature snow-covered mountains. Thick mince, apple, and pumpkin pies flanked the frosted cakes.

The moment Gray had taken his place at the head table, there was a wild scramble for seats and a rattle of the settees, very much as if they were playing the game of "Marching to Jerusalem," and there was danger that one person would be without a place. As soon as there was an approach to silence, the preacher asked a short blessing, which was none too short for his impatient flock. On Gray's right hand was Deacon Harding and on his left was Elder Belcher, who had resolved that he would give no excuse to the preacher for accusing him of "the deadly sin of gluttony," and rather regretted his seat of honor. Indeed, that night, little Tug, unwatched in a distant corner, consumed more of the good things than his father. There were many "valiant trenchermen" in the church, and it was a full hour before all had eaten, the tables cleared, and removed to the lumber room, the settees back in their places and the audience seated and expectant.

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First on the programme was an organ solo by Miss Harris, who struggled to evolve melody from the very stubborn instrument which protested in direful tones against being hurried out of its ordinary pace of "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow."

Next came a recitation from Tom Lunn's younger brother, who had chosen "Spartacus to the Gladiators," beginning with the haughty "Ye call me chief, and ye do well to call him chief, who, for ten long years, has met upon the arena every shape of man and beast that the wide empire of Rome could furnish."

The violin solo which followed was distressing, even to John Gray, who had no ear for music. The organ, under the fingers of Miss Harris, had at least the merit of giving out the same sound from the same note each time it was touched; the violin-player, unfortunately, must also be his own tuner, and the strings have no definite marks to guide unskillful fingers. Little Jimmy Lawton, the fiddler, was not skillful, and had no more ear for music than his pastor. He struggled manfully, but the result was tragic. Even the Peri, who had been looking through the window at the luscious dishes with all the desire of a cat's hungry heart, was driven away by the agonizing sounds. In the middle of the performance, in turning over his music the stand came to the floor with a crash, but this did not seriously disconcert the soloist, who finished the last note, followed by great applause from all the boys in the room.

Maud Green, who came next, had evidently devoted some hours to her toilet, and one sister remarked in an audible tone, "Good gracious! She's got powder on her nose!" as Maud mounted the platform. Maud wore her pink organdy, a pink ribbon belted her slender waist, and

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a pink rose was in her dark hair. She looked her very best, and recited "Curfew shall not ring to-night" with very wonderful elocutionary effects. When she had swung out with the bell, and had regained her footing, she descended to her seat, not having received the applause she thought was due her. Indeed, she had expected to be encored, and was prepared to give "Mabel, little Mabel, with her face against the pane."

When Jude and Belcher took their places to sing, they were received with hearty applause. They had sung "Larboard Watch Ahoy" a great many times, but they could really sing it and it never grew old. They were applauded until Belcher sang "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep," to the lowest notes of which all listened with amazement. Jude sang "Nellie was a Lady," as only he could sing it.

There now appeared a line of very little girls, dressed in their best, and looking, some smiling and happy, and others white and frightened. They represented children from various parts of the world, who, still unblessed by the sound of the gospel, were suffering in the shadows of heathendom. One after the other they stepped up to the platform, told of their afflictions, and ended with the same line, "Won't some one come over the sea, and help a little one like me?" Last and least was Molly Belcher, and this was her first appearance on any stage. She had looked forward with joy to the thought of distinguishing herself, but when the moment came she had a very bad attack of stage fright. She could not speak until coached by her teacher, but succeeded in saying, in a very low voice,

"I'm a little Esquimo girl,
From up in the northwest snows,
They're awfully cruel, those savages wild," —

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Here Molly stuck for a moment, but the final words, "Won't some one come over the sea and help a little one like me?" came out in a torrent; and she ended by bursting into tears and holding out her two little hands to the minister. At this appeal, Gray sprang forward, took Molly in his arms, and carried her back with him to his seat, she weeping copiously on his shoulder. It was the first time he had ever held a grieving child in his arms, and there rose in his breast a strange feeling of pride and happiness as he thought that it was upon him and not to her mother or father that Molly had called in her distress.

The last number on the programme was "Sleight-of-Hand, Pasco Tripp." After he had run away from the village and joined the circus, it was said that he had become a ventriloquist and a sleight-of-hand performer during the winter months. He had given up ventriloquism, although he still retained a habit of speaking with lips almost motionless. Every year at one of the church sociables, he gave an exhibition of sleight-of-hand, which went far to convince his neighbors that he was in league with the Evil One. What helped the impression was Pasco's appearance in a rather rusty dress-suit, the long tails of which were much like that ascribed to His Satanic Majesty. The preacher gave the announcement without rising from his seat, which faced the platform from the side, where he could also see the congregation. He did not wish to put Molly down, for her sobs were beginning to cease. As Pasco stood before them all, John Gray was impressed again with the evil dominance the stable-keeper seemed to have over all those upon whom he looked. The story of the demoniac who was so strong that "no man could bind him, no, not with chains," came back to his mind again. Pasco went through the ordinary

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professional "patter," rolling up his cuffs and showing his empty pockets. He began with coin tricks, and, obtaining a silver half-dollar from Elder Crocker, transformed it into an old-fashioned penny, rather to the horror of the Elder, who hated to see a change of that kind, even if it was not permanent. He next asked for a pack of cards and pretended great surprise that Deacon Harding denied having one in his possession. He even insisted upon searching the Deacon to his just indignation. "It's a pity," declared Pasco, "that no one can loan me a pack of cards, for I can't do my best tricks without them." He looked over his audience for a moment, then, turning suddenly, walked up to John Gray. "Preacher, are you sure you have n't got a pack of cards in the breast-pocket of your coat?"

"Yes," replied the minister, "I am very sure."

"Of course, you would n't care to bet I did n't find the cards in your pocket?"

"No, I do not bet," replied the preacher, who did not like the way he was being addressed and did not smile.

"Well, I'm sorry to say you're mistaken," said Pasco, and, slipping his hand inside the preacher's coat, he brought forth a particularly disreputable-looking pack of cards. At this every one laughed but the preacher, who reddened with anger.

There was nothing particularly original about Pasco's performance, although it seemed almost miraculous to his neighbors. He drew eggs out of his mouth and made an imaginary omelet in Elder Crocker's hat, and he produced white mice that ran over his shoulders. It was a coincidence that Pasco had a cage of white mice in his little room at the stable, and an examination at the moment would have proved it empty.

His last trick was with the colored handkerchiefs, of

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which he produced beautiful and varied shades. "Is there any one here who will loan me a handkerchief? I want a large white gentleman's handkerchief." This would seem to have been a request easily satisfied, but the gentlemen of Wesley had a decided preference for colored handkerchiefs, and those who carried white ones were not in possession of the article fresh from the laundry. Only John Gray at that moment would have been able to comply with the "Magician's" desire, and he did not care to have anything more to do with Pasco than was absolutely necessary. Again, as with the cards, Pasco expressed his regret, and again he suddenly turned on the preacher, descended from the platform, and, reaching out his long hand, drew a handkerchief from John Gray's pocket. Walking back to the platform he unfolded it, but to the horror of the preacher and the amusement of his congregation, it turned out to be a small lady's handkerchief. Pasco, at this revelation, pretended great discomfiture, and said:

"I'm sorry to have got the wrong handkerchief, but I had no way of knowing that the preacher had made the same mistake before I did. I s'pose I ought to return it to the rightful owner. Let me see what's written down here in the corner. 'T ain't very plain, but I can make out an L-A-W-T-O-N. Here it is, Mrs. Lawton, there must 'a' been a high wind last Monday morning."

At this there was the heartiest laughter of all. Mrs. Lawton blushed very prettily, and there were many joking remarks. A few of the congregation realized that Pasco was making a deliberate attempt to hold their pastor up to ridicule, but the majority took it in good part and thought it very funny.

John Gray's sense of humor was not over-developed,

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and it was with difficulty that he could conceal his anger. He felt the affront was not alone against him, but against the church and religion as well. He realized, however, that he must endure the mockery in silence, and he sat with Molly in his arms while the many-colored handkerchiefs were produced by Pasco's deft fingers, and until he had descended from the platform followed by a tremendous burst of applause.

After the formal exercises were over, there were games for the children and the grown-ups. For the "Fish Pond" a square tent of white sheeting without a top was erected in one corner of the vestry. There were bamboo poles with lines, but minus hooks, with which the fishers could angle who paid ten cents for the privilege. The line was thrown over the top of the tent, and, when a twitch announced to the expectant fisher that he had caught something, he pulled out what proved to be a packet tied to the line, and unwrapped it before the laughing crowd.

The first to leave were Jared Small and other folks from "the mountain," for some of them had a dozen miles to drive over roads rutted and strewn with rocks. Then the children went, and by ten o'clock the vestry was empty and Crocker was putting out the lights. Jude walked home with the preacher, but Gray had nothing more to say than "Yes" and "No," in answer to Jude's cheerful conversation. He felt that Pasco had scored a decided triumph over him, and his heart was hot with resentment. He had forgotten his desire to convert Pasco, and in its place came the determination to win back his prestige with the church and to recover his own self-respect by getting the best of Pasco in the struggle that was going on between them.

By the time he had reached home, however, he had so

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far regained his sense of humor as to laugh at his annoyance when the cards were produced from his pocket and Mrs. Lawton's handkerchief was displayed to the audience. Strange to say, his last thought before he fell asleep was relief that Alice Hale had not seen his discomfiture.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE day after the sociable was dark and dismal and cold, not the dry cold of January, but a driving, bitter chill that penetrated the walls of the houses and reached the very bones. The sky was leaden, the village cheerless, and life without a ray of joy. For the first time John Gray was despondent. His experience at the sociable had been very humbling to his pride. He thought of things he might have said and done that would have put Pasco in his place. Why had they not occurred to him? He had always been so sure of the triumph of righteousness that it came as a shock to him to realize that, for a time at least, evil might be victorious. He quoted, "How long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things?" with an appreciation of their meaning that he had never known before.

A bright sun might have dispelled Gray's gloom, but the day deepened it. He heaped tamarack knots in the fireplace, and watched the spurts of bluish flame leap from the pitch in the wood, but still his depression clung to him. Suddenly he realized how, on a day like this, a man, uncomfortable and unhappy, might turn to the stimulant of liquor. He could understand something of Jude's temptation and the charm of the Daniel Webster Club. He even sympathized with Elder Crocker, who at a time like this could go to his corner cupboard and revive himself with a drink of Jamaica ginger.

He dwelt all day in the Valley of Humiliation, occasionally climbing out of it, but descending again into its depths.

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All the time, however, the determination grew in him to win in a return battle with Pasco. The preacher strode up and down his study, his jaw set, his mind busy, on plans to avenge his defeat.

His first opportunity was that very Saturday night. He had asked Jude to take supper with him, and later, when the Advisory Board came, Jude was to go upstairs to the preacher's bedroom and spend the evening. He could not see how it was possible for Jude to go wrong, but when six o'clock came and the stage-driver did not arrive, he waited five minutes longer, and then he put on his hat and coat and sallied forth. It was blowing a gale and the rain was pouring down in torrents. The last leaves were being stripped from the elm trees and there was a stream of water as large as a brook running down the deep gutter. As the minister tried to find a place where he could cross the torrent, there came to him again a sense of the power of evil. Something baffled his good endeavors in Wesley. There was a Spirit of Darkness there, a malicious spirit that strove against the soul of man. He had always thought of this power in the city streets after nightfall, slinking from the glare of the lights into the shadows of the alleys, and leaping from the blackness of cellars and pest-holes. He had never thought of a personal devil in a country village like Wesley, but to-night he realized that the devil had also the attribute of omnipresence. The lights were faint, with only a few flickering lamps illuminating the streets, and feeble rays from solitary windows, soon lost in the engulfing darkness. Physical means might help, but they would not suffice to combat the spirit of wickedness that caught the weaker members of his flock and threw them into pits of evil. "The devil and all his works," he repeated to himself. He was face to face with

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the reality of evil. Would he meet defeat or would he gain a victory?

He found a place where the stream of water was narrower, and, taking a short run, he leaped it without wetting his feet, which he took as a good omen; but when he reached the stable door, his mind became again sensitive to the force of evil. The big door of the stable was closed, with the exception of a narrow gap, through which the preacher slipped. The stage was standing on the floor, still dripping with water, but Jude could not be found, and one of the stable-men said that Jude had "left a few minutes ago." Where had he gone? The man did not know. The preacher went out, walked down one side of the street and back the other, and then went into Crocker's store, which had its usual Saturday night crowd, in spite of the storm. No one knew anything about Jude. He had broken his promise; he was probably filling himself with rye whiskey at the Webster Club that very minute. As Gray started for home again, he was assaulted by the sense of the principalities and powers of wickedness. He could see dim figures creeping up the stairs of the Daniel Webster Club, and there came to him a picture of Faith Harding's sad face. He realized that the spirit of evil was intangible; he could not seize it by the throat, as he could a wild beast; he could not face it, as if it were a man and fight it with his fists; he must fight the intangible with the intangible; he must awake and arouse the spiritual forces of Wesley so that the Sun of Victory would shine upon the banners of righteousness.

The Daniel Webster Club, however, was tangible. There was a room with four walls, with doors and windows, in which Jude Burt, a member of his church whom he

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loved, was being made a beast. Here was something which could be fought. When he reached the parsonage, he had determined that something should be done to overthrow this camp of the Midianites.

Upon entering his study, the picture was almost exactly like that he had seen at the first meeting of the Board. There were Harding and Belcher on opposite sides of the fire, Crocker in a chair near them, and French walking up and down the room. Yet, with the experience through which he had passed, how different these men seemed, how different the church, the village, and the world itself!

The preacher went to his desk, read a short passage of Scripture, and after a few words of prayer, he looked on a sheet of paper before him and said:

"We still have the names of Faith Harding and Jude Burt on which to act. This is our sole business to-night, and I think it should be finally settled. I have seen Faith Harding several times. She is penitent, desirous of coming back into the church, and taking up her Christian life as before. She is prepared to make public confession of her sin, but for some reason I cannot discover, she is unwilling to appear before the Board. I do not find there is any rule which compels her to do this. I have given the matter careful consideration, and, after earnest prayer, I strongly recommend that we do not insist, but yield to her request. I think it is a responsibility I should not care to assume, if I refused to receive her back into fellowship. What is the feeling of the Board?"

Deacon Harding spoke first, slowly and wearily, but as one whose mind is made up and cannot be moved. "I see no reason why we should make any exception from our custom in this case."

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"Nor I, nuther," cried Elder Crocker, rising excitedly to his feet. "She's shown her disrespect for this Board again an' again. She's still livin' with Alice Hale, who was sassy to us right in this room."

"Where shall she live, Asa?" asked Belcher, "with you or me? My wife won't have her, her father won't take her in, it's a bad night for her to sleep outdoors. I say, let her make her confession an' come back to us. The poor girl has suffered enough."

"What do you say, Brother French?" asked Gray.

"I say, if she cares to come back to a church with members as hard-hearted as her father and as ugly as Elder Crocker, for God's sake let her. I wonder that she's willing to."

He spoke bitterly and resentfully, his attitude a challenge, his words defiant.

"Elder French," said the preacher, shaking his head gravely, "I must ask you not to reflect upon the motives of other members of this Board, although I agree with you in your decision. Unless a ballot is insisted on, I shall announce the will of the Board is to receive Faith Harding back in the church after public confession."

"I want a ballot, then," exclaimed Asa, rising again to his feet and gesticulating with both hands. "I want every member of this Board to be put on record. I think I shall send a report to the Presidin' Elder. I'd like to see what he thinks about it. I don't know what the Wesley Church is comin' to, acceptin' members like Faith Harding. She has —"

"We don't care to hear what she's done," interrupted French, rising to his feet and facing Crocker. "We've heard enough about Faith Harding's faults, and I protest against going over them any more."

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"And so do I," chimed in Belcher. "Nobody's got anything new to say. Why not vote an' get it over?"

"'Faults' 's hardly the word I'd use," declared Asa, "but I s'pose it ain't no use to talk or argue any more. I s'pose you an' Dave will vote one way an' me an' the Deacon the other, an' that, with the preacher castin' the decidin' vote, you'll git your own way. One thing I can do, an' that is to demand a regeler vote."

"The preacher will certainly vote with Elder Belcher and Elder French on this matter," declared John Gray calmly, "and we will take a formal vote."

The ballots were prepared, gathered, and it was decided that Faith Harding's name should be returned to the church roll after public confession of sin and repentance. Elder Crocker tried to reopen the subject, but he was ruled out of order and finally subsided, grumbling and complaining.

"Concerning Jude Burt, I do not know what to say," said the preacher. "He did not appear at church last Sunday, he promised to be here to-night. He has not kept his word. We do not know where he is."

"I do," interrupted Crocker, with a sneer. "He's tankin' up with rye whiskey at the club."

"Yes," agreed Gray, "he is probably getting drunk at the Daniel Webster Club, and do you know what I propose to do?" There was silence for a moment, as John Gray rose to his feet and said: "I propose to take him out of the club. I propose to save that good man, our brother in Christ, from his enemies and his besetting sin. The Midianites are encamped at the Daniel Webster Club. I call upon you as did Gideon to the hosts of Israel. Who will follow me?"

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As Gray spoke, there came an expression of the sternest determination to his face.

"You'll find the door locked an' bolted. How're yer goin' to git in?" inquired Crocker cynically.

"I propose to break that door, if I have to do it with my naked fists," declared Gray.

"It's against the law unless you have a constable and a search warrant," declared Belcher.

"We certainly don't want to set an example to evil-doers by acting with violence," said Harding.

"'Nless we find rum in the place, we'll be brought before the court an' fined," suggested Belcher, shaking his head gravely. "You know I'm with you in 'most everythin', Pastor, but I dunno 'bout this."

"'N' doors cost money, too," spoke up Asa.

"Yes, Asa," chimed in Belcher; "an' I know, what the rest don't, that you really own the buildin' that the Daniel Webster Club is in, an' if doors are broken, they're your doors an' come out o' your pocket. I don't propose to tell how I picked up this information, but I got it straight, an' I know."

"I ain't denyin' it," replied Crocker sulkily. "It is my buildin', an' I'm not ashamed of it. Do you s'pose I'm goin' into any foolish business like destroyin' my own property?"

"You have allowed this club, known to be the center of all the evil in Wesley, to remain in your building, as your tenant?" asked Gray. "What does your conscience say to this?"

"It don't trouble me a speck," replied Asa. "There's other rooms they could git. There's one over Babson's bin lyin' idle for a year. If I drove 'em out, 't would n't help none, an' I'd lose my money."

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To this cold-blooded reply the minister paid no attention, but turned to French: "Well, brother, what do you say?"

"I say I'm with you," declared French. "It's a rotten hole and ought to be put out of business. Furthermore, this is a sporting proposition such as has not come to light since I joined the church. There's an element of fight about it that I like."

"Good!" said Gray, taking David's hand.

Belcher watched the two young men for a moment and then said:

"I still think it's a mighty 'foolish undertakin', but I can't see you goin' it alone. I'm with you."

"No," said Gray, "it's too late. You remember the story of Gideon — the faint-hearted and the doubtful were left behind. Only David will go with me. Come, David."

He left the room a moment and was back with a rubber coat and a soft felt hat. French was ready, but so was Elder Belcher also.

"Look-a-here, Pastor, you can carry the Gideon idea too far. I'm goin' with you, whether you want me or not, an' I'll remind you that when it comes to breakin' down doors, you'll find me mighty useful."

French was so elated that, before they went out, he turned to Harding and Crocker and said: "You're missing a good thing. This is more like the 'three guardsmen' than I ever expected Wesley would show. 'One for all, all for one.'"

When they reached the street, Belcher said: "What was you jollyin' about, Dave? I don't see nuthin' to laugh at. We're runnin' the risk of bein' took up an' gettin' sore heads besides."

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"We're like the characters of a book, called 'The Three Musketeers.' You're 'Porthos' — he was the big one. The preacher here is 'Aramis,' and I'll call myself 'D'Artagnan.'" He was in high spirits in spite of Belcher's forebodings.

"I prefer the Bible comparison of Gideon and the Midianites," declared John Gray, as he strode ahead.

They were obliged to stop a couple of times for Elder Belcher, whose breath was entirely gone when they reached the club-house. They waited there until he was himself again. In front of them was the staircase running from the street to the second story. It was lit only by a lantern at the top. Up through the gloom they climbed, Gray first, French second, and Elder Belcher bringing up the rear.

CHAPTER XIX

THE room was long and narrow, the floor bare, worn, and dirty. There was only a single door, and the windows were covered with dark-green curtains. On the walls were pictures of a sporting character, Goldsmith Maid and Mate, driven in a carriage with spider wheels; "dark-town" chromos and plump and pleasing ladies in tights. Over the door was a grim picture of Daniel Webster, frowning down on everything. In the middle of the room was a round table, covered with newspapers, the *Police Gazette*, crumpled magazines, among which — a strange companion — was a large Bible. Above the table, suspended from the ceiling, black with smoke, was a large lamp, unlighted. Several wall lamps burned dimly, and a drop-lamp with three burners hung over a pool-table at one end of the room. At the other end was Jude Burt, seated at a small table, on which was a bottle of rye whiskey, a pitcher of water and a half-filled glass. Jude was drunk and happy, judging by the benevolent smile on his face. He was humming "Nellie was a Lady," and was paying no attention to the other members of the club.

Tom Lunn was extended full length on the pool-table, one foot on the floor. He had just pocketed a ball, and Pasco Tripp and Redny Feathers, each with a cue in his hand, were pounding on the floor by way of applause. Lunn was a big fellow, his hair unbrushed, a three days' beard on his face, in his shirt-sleeves, and with one suspender hanging over his hip. Redny was also in his shirt-sleeves, which were held in place by blue elastics decorated with bows and buckles in the shape of hearts. Pasco

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took a ball from the pocket and placed it with two others on the bottom shelf of the rack. This was Tom's; the shelf above had four balls, which belonged to Redny; and the top shelf held seven. This was Pasco's. One ball only was left on the table, the white ball in line behind it for the corner pocket. Lunn got off the table and, chalking his cue, studied the position, looking very wise and serious.

"Good shot!" exclaimed Pasco. "Get that ball and you tie with Redny."

"S'pose I don't get it," asked Lunn, who was very drunk.

"You're stuck for the drinks, unless we both flub," said Feathers, "and that's not likely."

"T ain't as easy as it looks," declared Lunn.

"I'll bet you miss it, or you don't miss it. Make your choice, suit yourself." At this very liberal proposition of Pasco's, Tom still hesitated, but finally came to a decision.

"I'll back myself to pocket that ball for a quarter, Pasc. What do you say?"

"You're on," said Tripp, handing a quarter to Redny, and Lunn dug a quarter from a dirty sheepskin wallet and gave it to Feathers. It was a sound rule of the club that no bet should be considered binding unless real money was put up.

These preliminaries having been gone through, Lunn took a bridge, squinted carefully, shot deliberately — and missed, to the great enjoyment of Redny and Pasco. Pasco pocketed the last ball, and said:

"Well, boys, let's liquor up. The drinks are on Tom."

As they left the pool-table, Jude was singing to himself, in a low voice,

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"Shall we gather at the river,
The beautiful, the beautiful river?" —

"No, Jude," declared Pasco, "we won't gather by any river unless it runs beer."

"That's the second bet and the third round of drinks I've lost to-night," grumbled Lunn.

"Yes, Tom," said Jude, "you're sort er a public benefactor to these fellers. Better let 'em alone."

"I can take care o' myself without no help," replied Lunn, "you betcher."

Jude persisted in his friendly warning: "They trot too fast for you, Tom. You're a three-minute hoss in the two-thirty class an' you ain't got a show."

"Oh, tank up and shut up, Jude," said Tripp.

"All right, Pasc, all right. I did n't mean no 'fense. I'm perfectly friendly with everybody," declared Jude, smiling benevolently and taking a long drink.

"Mine is beer this time," said Feathers. "I'm drier'n hell."

He went to an old sink in the corner and, taking a glass from the cupboard over it, turned one of the faucets, from which, instead of water, there came beer. Tom tried to fill his glass, but only a few drops came from the faucet.

"Damn it," said he, "the cow's run dry," removing a panel and tapping with his knuckles on a beer barrel concealed behind it. Pasco opened the door of the little cupboard, which was scored with chalk marks.

"There's only sixty drinks charged, an' there's eighty glasses in a barrel."

"Look's if some members o' this club were n't real gentlemen," declared Redny.

"Short memories," explained Pasco, with a cynical laugh. "Tom, you'll have to take whiskey with me."

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As he spoke, he drew down the pulley lamp over the table, unscrewed the top, and poured whiskey from it, first in Lunn's glass, then in his own, and they both drank. Jude at this moment started singing, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide."

"No, Jude, that is n't the 'eventide' falling, that's rain," said Redny. "Did you get wet drivin' over from the Junction?"

"Wet!" exclaimed Jude; "the hosses took so much through the skin they would n't drink when I tried to water 'em in the stable. This whiskey feels good an' warm."

"It's a damn nuisance, botherin' with that lamp every time you want a drop o' whiskey," growled Lunn.

"Well," replied Tripp, "I believe in playin' safe. When they raided us last winter, s'pose they'd found any liquor lyin' round loose. The Bible, too, had honorable mention. I nearly died laughin'." As he spoke Tripp opened the dummy book and showed two bottles of liquor. "The big bottle's the Old Testament, an' the little one's the New," explained Tripp. "They're private drinks. This is where Jude keeps his old rye, when it's not in use."

"You may think it funny," grumbled Lunn, "but I'm sick of all this monkey business. Folks has forgotten all about us."

"Have they?" exclaimed Tripp. "Gray is stirring things up again. He's knocked hell out of this club. There's five left us since he came to Wesley, an' one of 'em got religion an' joined the church. I'm damn serious when I say that while I'm president of this club we'll play safe. I don't mean to get caught."

As he spoke there was a knock on the door, and silence

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followed. Feathers choked as he gulped down his beer. Lunn seized all the glasses, took them to the sink and hurriedly washed them from the faucet from which water flowed.

"Who do you s'pose that is — so late?" exclaimed Tripp, under his breath. Then, going to the door, he inquired more loudly, "What knight approaches? By what mystic words do you bid us to let the drawbridge fall?"

From outside the door there came a voice in answer. "Wine, women, and song," and then, fretfully, "Hurry up, Pasc, I'm cold and wet." Tripp opened the door and Fred Miller entered. His umbrella was dripping, and he placed it in the sink. "If you must have a password, why don't you get something sensible? There's no women here, no song, and the nearest thing to wine is gasoline whiskey and flat beer."

Jude was singing:

"Nita, Juanita, can it be that we must part?

Nita, Juanita, lean thou on my heart."

Tripp pointed to Jude. "No song? Listen to that." Then, turning to Redny, he said, "Mr. Feathers, shake hands with Mr. Miller. He's our assembly-man."

"Pleased to meet you," declared Feathers, as they shook hands.

And when Pasco handed him a glass of whiskey, he remarked, "Aladdin did n't have anything on the Webster Club when it comes to lamps, did he, Pasc?"

"There's this difference, Fred," explained Pasco. "You've got to do something more than rub this lamp. Here, Tom, mark up Fred's drink against me on the door."

"Not on your life!" exclaimed Miller; "I'm paying for everything to-night."

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"Good Lord, Fred! What's the matter in Albany?" asked Tripp.

"I shan't see it much longer unless my friends get busy. The church people are talking of running some one against me. Crocker's at the head of it, and that old fox knows how to pull political chickens off their perches, believe me."

"What's he got against you?" asked Redny.

"Search me. The preacher, too, does n't like me, and I reciprocate. I wish I could get that bird where I could stop his flutter. I wonder why he let up on Jude and Faith after canning me?"

"Be areful how you speak about Faith," warned Lunn. "You'll start up Jude."

"Yes, Tom," said Tripp, "and when you started him it took us a half-hour to bring you back to life. I know Gray calls at the studio, but I believe he's sweet on Alice. What do you think o' that, Fred?"

"Alice and I understand each other," declared Miller shortly.

"Near's I can find out," continued Tripp, "the preacher's in love with Alice an' don't know it, not having the experience of Redny an' me in such matters. Hey, Red, how're you gettin' on with Maud?"

At this Feathers looked conscious and important. "Miss Green ain't the only one. Wandering around as I do, in the way of business, it's wonderful how many girls you find ready to fall for a feller of good address."

At this all laughed but Feathers, who was serious, and no one heard a knock on the door. There came another, louder, which they all heard, and the room was silent.

"Who in hell is that, knockin' so late?" asked Tripp under his breath.

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"It's probably one of the fellers," answered Lunn in an ordinary voice. "What makes you so jumpy, Pasc?"

Tripp went to the door and asked, "By what mystic words do you bid us let the drawbridge fall?"

For a moment there was no reply, and then came, clearly and distinctly, these words: "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

"What's that?" exclaimed Pasco.

Again came the voice from the outer hall, and louder still: "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

"Holy hell!" cried Tripp. "It's the preacher."

"Is there any place to hide?" asked Redny. "Is there any way out of this?"

"Yes," answered Tripp, "a twenty-foot jump from the window."

There was a sound of muffled voices, then a heavy fist pounding against the panels, and a voice demanding, "Open the door."

"Don't do it," said Miller.

"Let us in, or we'll break in," came a rumbling bass.

"That's Belcher," said Lunn. "You can't mistake his voice. How many do you s'pose there are of 'em?"

"We're likely to know damn quick," said Tripp. And then, in a louder voice: "This is a private club. If you break that door, you'll be looking through one with iron slats. Go home to hell all of you." He then turned to Lunn and commanded, "Hoist up that lamp and wash those glasses. Hurry!"

Lunn and Feathers were obeying, when there came the sound of straining against the door.

"That's Belcher's three hundred pounds," said Tripp. "Shall we let them in? They'll get in any way."

"Don't do it," begged Feathers. "S'pose Crocker

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catches me here. Where's my trade?" As he spoke, he put his shoulder against the door and pushed frantically.

"What 'll we do with Jude?" inquired Lunn.

"Put his bottle in the Bible and wash his glass," commanded Tripp.

This was barely done when the door broke in with a crash, toppling Feathers over, and Belcher's huge bulk followed, with Gray and French behind him. With their entrance, Pasco's manner changed entirely, and he greeted his visitors as if they were honored guests.

"Why, if it is n't the preacher! I'm sorry we kept you waiting. I did n't know who it was. 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon' did n't happen to be the password -- to-night."

"You are a liar," declared Gray, with an accusing finger. "I heard you say, 'Holy hell! It's the preacher.'"

"Only a polite lie, Parson," replied Tripp, "intended to soothe your feelin's. I'd most respectfully suggest, also, that callin' a man a liar's likely to make trouble."

"I'm not afraid of trouble," said Gray. "I mean to do more than preach against sin. I've come for Jude Burt. Where is he?" Then, catching sight of Jude, who was too far gone to understand what was going on, he went up to him and shook him, first gently, then vigorously, until the stage-driver looked up with a smile on his face and said:

"Hullo, Parson. Glad to see you. 'Scuse me for not risin', won't you?"

"Come, Brother Burt," commanded Gray.

"Yes, Jude, come along with me," begged Belcher, who, with French, had followed the minister.

"Why, 'Lige, this is a surprise," exclaimed Jude. "I did n't know you an' Dave was Daniel Websters. Set

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down. I'm not goin', not for a long time. I'm perfectly comfortable, jes' 's I am."

"You promised not to come here to-night," said the minister.

"Yes, Parson, I know," answered Jude, "an' I meant to stay away, but I jes' could n't."

"But you can leave now," declared Belcher. "Come, Jude, come along with us."

Belcher tried to lift him, but Jude clung to his seat and remonstrated. "Look-a-here, 'Lige, lemme 'lone. I won't be drove like a balky hoss. I'm perfectly comfortable, jes' 's I am."

French tried to persuade Jude, with no more success than the others, and Gray turned to Tripp with, "Where do you keep the rum that has made this good man a beast?"

"Mr. Gray, it's evident your education's been neglected in the matter o' liquor, much as you may know 'bout Greek. Unless I've fully lost my sense of smell, it's rye whiskey Jude's been drinkin'. He brought his load with him. There ain't a drop o' liquor in this club. Look for it if you want to, the place is open."

"So are the gates of hell," declared the minister solemnly, "the 'holy hell' you spoke about."

"Parson," replied Tripp, "you don't seem real pleased with this club, in spite of the fact that you were so eager to get in. Look us over, an' p'r'aps you'll change your mind an' want to be a member. Here's Dave here, we'll take him in, too, though I'm rather surprised to see a young feller like him trottin' around in your company."

"I'll trot with whom I like, Pasc," declared French. "You can't make any bluff that will go down with me. I'm young enough to know you too well. You've got

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liquor somewhere about the premises, and we propose to find it."

"Well, play 'hide and seek' if you like, or 'hunt the thimble.' If there was anything here, I'd call out 'cold' or 'warm' to help you. Play away and don't mind me."

The minister, French, and Belcher examined every corner of the clubroom. They looked into the woodbox, behind the green curtains, and inside a pitcher on the shelf. They tapped the walls with their knuckles, and examined the coats hanging on the wall. Finally, they gave it up, and the minister went to Jude and again tried to persuade him, without success.

"Found everything all right, Parson?" inquired Pasco, with a sneer. "If you're tired of 'hunt the thimble,' would you like to make a fourth in a little game of pool? There's no bettin' an' no bad language."

"I will not," replied the minister. "I will wait for Jude."

"It'll probably be some wait, then," interposed Tom Lunn. "He may not go home to-night."

These words reaching Jude's befuddled brain, he began to sing:

"I'm going home, I'm going home,
To die no more, to die no more.
To die no more, to die no more,
I'm going home to die no more."

At this all smiled but the preacher, even Belcher and French joining. Pasco had enjoyed himself thoroughly, particularly when the eyes of his visitors wandered around the room, and rested upon the lamp with the whiskey plainly visible through the glass. And now, wishing to show how little fear he had of his visitors' explorations, he said:

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"Well, Parson, I don't s'pose you mind if some of us play pool. You must make yourself entirely at home."

Feathers had regained his equanimity at not finding Elder Crocker, his customer, in the exploring party, so he joined with Tripp and Lunn, playing pool as if nothing had occurred to interrupt them.

Jude, waking suddenly, after a prodigious nod, in which he nearly bumped his head on the table, recognized French with a most benevolent smile, — "Hullo, Dave, I'm glad to see you. I tell everybody you're the best ball-player Wesley ever produced. Do you remember when you made that home run 'gainst Glens Falls with the bases full?"

"I do," replied French, "and you're fuller than the bases ever were. It's time you made a 'home run,' too. Come, Jude."

At this Jude's smile disappeared, and he shook his head in a most melancholy way. "Dave, you dis'point me. You do, you dis'point me. I ain't got a friend on earth." So greatly did he pity himself that his lip trembled and a big tear rolled down his cheek.

Miller had not spoken a word since the door had been broken down. He now came up to the minister and said: "I s'pose you know that you're acting illegally, Mr. Gray. As a lawyer, I must inform you that you are guilty of the serious crime of breaking and entering."

"I'm perfectly well aware that what you say is true," replied the minister, facing him steadily. "For this reason Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker would not come with me."

"You've brought nothing but trouble into this village," declared Miller.

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"The Master said, 'I came not to send peace, but a sword.'"

"You don't stand too well with your congregation as it is," said Miller. "Being arrested won't help you. I warn you that we propose to go to the limit of the law. A minister who breaks it won't go down in Wesley."

"I am obeying the orders of the great Lawgiver, and Saint Paul was imprisoned for conscience' sake."

All this time Miller had kept his temper with difficulty but now he burst forth with, "How glib you are! I've a mind to fix you so you won't look fit to stand in your pulpit for a month."

The minister had been keenly disappointed, first, in not being able to prevail upon Jude to leave, and, second, at his vain search for liquor. He now faced Miller with a flushed face and blazing eyes.

"I suppose that's a threat. Well, listen to me: I'm not afraid of you or any one in this room. When I look at Jude, I'm ready to fight with any weapon in the name of the Lord."

"And of Gideon," interposed Jude stupidly, "don't forget Gideon, Preacher."

The game of pool had been finished, Lunn being stuck once more for the drinks, the bet to be paid after the raiders had departed. Feathers had shown a copy of the *Police Gazette* to Tripp. On it was a large picture of a woman in tights, and Tripp took it to the preacher and said:

"Would n't you like to quiet your mind with a little serious reading? Here's this week's *Police Gazette*."

The minister took the paper, glanced at it, and then opened the stove door and gave it to the flames.

All this time Pasco had been bland and cordial, but the

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burning of the paper was like a torch to his temper. "Preacher," he said, a threatening tone in his voice, "I think I heard you say something about fighting a few minutes ago. That's a plain bluff and you know it. You've only nerve to talk. You think your white tie will save your hide."

"Well, Pasco, my tie's blue," interposed French, and taking his place by the side of Gray.

"Dave, you're a light weight. You're out of your class against Tom, Miller, and me," declared Tripp.

"Well, what there is you'll find all right," replied French. "We're not looking for trouble, but we're not afraid of it."

Belcher came up behind them and whispered: "I'd go easy, Pastor. We don't want a fight. There's too many of them."

"I'd act the same were I alone," answered the minister in a clear voice.

While this conversation was going on, Jude was forgotten. He had become very thirsty, had reached for his bottle, and had not found it. He now rose unsteadily, went to the table, opened the dummy Bible and took from it his bottle of rye whiskey, and was starting back to his seat, when Gray noticed the open book. He sprang forward, seized it and passed it back to Belcher. Tripp leaped at Gray with an oath, just too late to touch the book. Gray pushed him back with a sweep of his arm and he fell against Jude, who dropped his bottle on the floor with a crash. They clung together a moment, Jude remonstrating, "Easy, Preacher, you're awful rough." Tripp broke from Jude's clinging arms with difficulty and rushed to the door, crying out:

"They've caught us with the goods! Don't let 'em get away with it."

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"Yes," declared Gray, "we have caught you 'with the goods.'"

"The Midianites," in the shape of Tripp, Lunn, Miller, and Feathers, were encamped in front of the door, and "Gideon," with the "Israelites," as personified by French and Belcher, stood face to face with them. Tripp was the first to speak.

"Listen to me, we've come to a 'show-down.' Give up that book."

"Yes," replied Gray, "we've 'come to a show-down.' Elder, hold on to that book."

"Listen to me, Preacher," said Tripp, "if you don't give that up, we'll take it and some one will get hurt damn bad in the operation."

"Yes," answered Gray, "whoever tries to take that devilish book will get hurt 'damn bad.' We're going through that door."

"No, you're not," declared Tripp. "We're four against you three, Belcher's too fat to fight, Dave's a light weight, and you're too white-livered."

"You're mistaken in your count, Pasco Tripp," said Gray solemnly; "the Lord is with us and that makes four."

Jude's mind was in sad confusion. He looked from one speaker to the other and was at last beginning to sense the conditions. He now came forward, and, taking his place by the side of the minister, interrupted with —

"An' the Lord's some scrapper. But, Parson, you're 'most as bad a counter as Pasc. There's you an' 'Lige an' Dave make three, an' I can see you — pretty well. The Lord I can't see, an' for fear He may not be here, I'll take the Lord's place, an' I make four. Git away from that door."

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As he spoke he lurched forward, swinging his fists like a flail and selecting Lunn for his antagonist. Now, Tom had experienced Jude's prowess and he retreated, Jude following him dizzily. Neither Miller nor Feathers had stomach for a row, the first realizing that it would hurt him with his constituents, and the latter fearing it might compromise him with his trade. Pasco only showed fight, and struck at Gray; but the blow went over the minister's shoulder and they clinched, struggled for a moment, and then Tripp was thrown over a corner of the pool-table and fell on the floor. Lunn absolutely declining to fight, Jude came back to his party by the door, a smile on his face, and said:

"Well, Pastor, we sure have overcome the Midianites: the road's clear."

Jude took Belcher's arm and French put his hand under Jude's elbow, as they went out. The minister stopped a moment in the doorway, and, looking back at the "Midianites," declared:

"Yes, Jude, the way is clear, and the password's 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon.'"

CHAPTER XX

THE Sunday morning following the raid on the Daniel Webster Club dawned bright and clear. John Gray awoke with an extraordinary sense of elation and triumph. He went over the experience of the previous evening, and enjoyed every moment of it. He could remember many victories at college where his brains had proved superior to those of others, but he had never been in a struggle like this. He had never pitted his wits against those of other men and had never felt the joy of the conqueror in a physical struggle. After Gideon with his followers had left the Midianites to their discomfiture, they had gone back to the parsonage in triumph, Belcher clinging to the hollow Bible and Jude to the friendly elbows of his leader and Elder French. When they opened the Bible on the Preacher's desk, they found one bottle of Bourbon whiskey and one of rum. This was evidence enough to free them from guilt in "breaking and entering," and with it the Daniel Webster Club could be put out of existence. They were all very happy, until suddenly they noticed a cloud coming over Jude's face. He declared that in spite of the wickedness of the Daniel Webster Club, he had no right to "go ag'in' 'em." He was a member, they were his friends, and he should have remained neutral. He grew more and more maudlin, until finally, loading himself with reproaches, he burst into tears. When he drew out his handkerchief, an overpowering odor of rye whiskey filled the room.

"Well, Jude," exclaimed French, "how long have you been using whiskey for perfumery?"

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"I did n't do it," replied Jude indignantly. "I don't know who did. 'T was that handkerchief that made me go wrong. I was comin' over here just as I promised, but when I tried to blow my nose, I got the smell of it an' it made me plumb crazy for a drink. Who do you s'pose did me such a dirty trick?"

"One of Pasco's little games," suggested Belcher.

"Well, here's a good place for the handkerchief," declared French, as he threw it on the fire, where it burst into flames.

"And home is a good place for us all," said Belcher. "To-morrow's Sunday, an' the Pastor must get some sleep."

So they departed, Jude between French and Belcher, whom they saw safely in his room at the stable.

On Sunday morning the news of the raid on the Daniel Webster Club had reached every household in Wesley, and the church was crowded. The "horse-shed congregation" were gathered together, discussing the affair, when Gray arrived. It was certain that the preacher, Elder French, and Elder Belcher had made up the attacking party. There was no doubt that Pasco Tripp, Tom Lunn, and Redny Feathers were at the club. Some said Fred Miller was there and some not, for Fred had given his henchmen a tip to free him, if possible. It was certain that Miller had been driven over to the Junction to catch "the midnight." There was much question as to what part Jude had taken, and whether he had sided with the church or the club. It had been agreed among the followers of Gideon that they would not talk, and Pasco had sworn the Midianites to secrecy; but more or less news had leaked out. Jude had arrived at church very early and gone directly to his seat, giving no one an opportunity to

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pump him. It was certain that liquor had been discovered at the club, but the quantity and kind was unknown, and the more imaginative reported an astonishing list and a remarkable quantity. Either Pasco had struck the preacher or the preacher had felled Pasco, the weight of opinion being that Gray had got the best of the encounter. One thing was certain, the minister had said "damn." The "horse-shed congregation" rather admired the preacher for his strong language, but when the story reached the ladies discussing the affair, at the church entrance, there were many "Oh's" and "Ah's." Abby Green did not hesitate to express her opinion on "sech awful language from a preacher." Deacon Harding was gloomy and taciturn. Elder Crocker was very sour and ugly. His door had been broken in spite of his protest. He tried not to talk, but could not restrain his bitter tongue, and it was very evident there was a decided difference of opinion in the "Board."

When the minister mounted to his pulpit, some of his elation evaporated. As he looked down on the faces before him, it was evident that there were contrary opinions and conflicting emotions.

Pasco Tripp was absent. For the first Sunday since he had reached Wesley, John Gray did not face the cynical stare of the cold blue eyes which chilled his heart and challenged his faith. Jude looked up at him, however, his face alight with religious zeal. His early retirement, with only a portion of his usual Saturday night "load," had turned Jude out particularly fresh and happy.

The text that day was "The best robe." Few sermons on the Prodigal Son improve on the simple reading of that wonderful Bible story. As a rule the amplification and the explanation of the clergymen only weaken this remarkable

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parable which has reached the heart of the world through the centuries. But John Gray was not a common preacher, and his sermon was different from anything which had ever been heard in the Wesley Church. Its purpose was plain, and its object could be clearly recognized by all who heard it. He held his congregation spellbound, until at the end of the sermon he said, "The Bible has no parable of the Prodigal Daughter. Is it for lack of such that the world has treated its wandering girls so differently from its sinning boys? The girls often do not return, well knowing what is in store for them. When they do, they are not 'seen afar off'; no 'fatted calf' is killed for them; no 'best robe' is given them. Sometimes they are sent away, and if in their humility they beg to be made 'one of thy hired servants,' they are taken at their word and the finger of scorn is forever pointed at them. When will the world treat the Prodigal Daughter like the Prodigal Son? When will she be greeted with, 'This thy sister was dead and is alive again, she was lost and is found'?"

Every one in the church knew that the preacher was referring to Faith Harding, and many eyes were turned on Deacon Harding's pew, where he sat, stern and white-faced. Elder Crocker sniffed scornfully. Abby Green and Maud, with many of their white-robed sisters, shrugged their shoulders, and Mrs. Belcher sat with a set face, on which disagreement was plainly written.

Elder Belcher and Jude supported the preacher with many fervent "Amen's," and they were joined by the approval of other kindly souls in the congregation. Mrs. Davis and Mrs. Harp nodded approvingly to each other, and Mrs. Lawton nodded to herself at her own personal gratification.

After the service was over, the congregation did not

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disperse as quickly as usual. Little knots of people gathered here and there, and in some cases the arguments were heated. John Gray understood perfectly well what was going on, although no one attempted to speak to him, and he finally went home, leaving many of the congregation still in the church. His elation had left him, and he realized how unsympathetic his people were the moment that he stepped out of the beaten track and antagonized any of the bed-rock beliefs which they possessed.

In the afternoon, he made up his mind to call at the studio and to tell Faith how the Board had decided in her favor, and that she need not appear before them. He found both Faith and Alice in the old barn, Alice working over a little landscape on her easel, Faith with a book on her lap. They both rose to greet him, Alice coming forward with outstretched hand, and with an expression of friendship on her face which he had never seen before.

"Jude has been here and told me about last night. 'T was a splendid thing to do," she declared. "I've said plenty of harsh things to you and against you. We don't think alike about a single thing; but I want to show myself open-minded enough to congratulate you."

At this open praise, Gray was confused, blushed like a schoolboy and stammered his appreciation. Faith was no less cordial, and the minister's heart was cheered and warmed, after the chilly reception from his congregation.

"It is easy to make too much of what we did last night," declared the minister. "Shutting up the club will help us, but I am still worried about Jude. Do you remember," he asked Alice, "how you told me you had a plan?"

"Yes," she replied, "and I hope it will not seem foolish to you. Jude is able to control himself until the end of the

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week. Suppose next Saturday night we have a little gathering here in the studio. We can give Jude something good to eat. I'm sure I'm a better cook than the one at the Mountain House, and Faith will brew him a cup of coffee as strong as the rye whiskey Jude loves. We'll make everything as cozy and jolly as possible. We'll keep it up till he is ready to go to bed. I don't believe he will break away from us if we handle him like this."

"It sounds all right," said Gray, "and is certainly worth trying. I shall be very glad to come."

"You see," continued Alice, "Jude wants society almost as much as he wants drink. He wants a little 'fling' of some kind, and that reminds me — did it ever occur to you that everybody wants something of this kind, and that if you close up the Daniel Webster Club, you must have something to take its place?"

"Yes," said the preacher, "I suppose they do want something more than a church gathering."

"Of course they do," chimed in Faith.

"Well," said Alice, "why don't you take the clubroom, now that the Daniel Websters must get out, and make it a club where the men of Wesley, old and young, can meet together and have a good time? When a man wants to amuse himself outside of his own house, besides the meetings at the church, he has only Crocker's store for a loafing-place. He can sit on a cracker-box and gossip, but he ought to have something that will really amuse him. You can buy the furniture for a song, and include the pool-table with it. Tell me, Mr. Gray, is there anything really wrong in a man knocking the balls around a pool-table? Is it any worse than baseball, about which everybody in Wesley is enthusiastic?"

"No," answered the preacher; "the only difference is

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that the pool-table has been connected with places where there is gambling and people of doubtful character resort. Of course it's foolish, but I'm afraid it would make a dreadful schism if we tried to keep the pool-table. They might allow bagatelle to go unchallenged."

"Of course it's foolish," agreed Alice. "You have balls and a cue and a platform of green cloth. I think you're man enough to stick to the pool-table."

"Well, I'll think it over; perhaps I am," said the preacher, rising; "and I must leave you or you will make me so radical that I shall not be able to stay in the Methodist Church at all."

With this he took his leave, and when he reached home, found Jude seated on his front steps waiting for him. He was very serious and very much in earnest.

"Pastor, what do you propose to do with Pasco an' Tom an' Miller an' Redny?"

"I propose to have them all arrested. I should have complained to the constable to-day if it had not been the Sabbath."

"I was 'fraid you was plannin' to do somethin' like this. It's been troublin' me ever since I got home from church. I woke up early this mornin', worryin' about it, an' I've made up my mind to ask you not to prosecute."

"How can we help it?" argued the preacher. "They've broken the law, they've defied public opinion. We should hold them up to condemnation and make them a warning to others."

"Yes, Pastor, I know that seems the natural thing to do, but 't would hurt me dreadful bad. Pasco says he'll close the club an' won't start another. You know I was a member myself, both of the club an' the church. The church, of course, comes fust, but I ought not to go

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back on the club. I feel like bein' called by my full name, Judas Iscariot Burt, or Benedict Arnold Burt, or some other traitor. Jest hold the proof on Pasc. There's a lot in the church an' the village that don't like the way you acted last night. O' course you was all right, but I believe 't will be better to let the whole thing simmer down."

"I'll think it over, Jude," replied the minister. "Perhaps it might be best to hold the prosecution over them with the understanding that it will be pressed the moment liquor gets brought into the village. There's one other condition, too, Jude."

"What's that, Preacher? Make any condition you like, as long 's you do what I ask you."

"Well, Jude, the other condition is this. I will let up on the Daniel Webster Club as long as you keep straight."

"By gracious! Preacher," said Jude, "you sure have got me in a cleft stick now. I'll keep straight if I have to fasten my jaw with a padlock."

CHAPTER XXI

THE next morning, after breakfast, when Gray went into his study, he noticed that Cæsar was not swinging on his perch, but lay in the bottom of his cage with his claws lifted to heaven. The parrot had not been himself since his battle with the cat: he had seldom sworn and had moped in his cage, silent and depressed. The death of Cæsar affected John Gray strangely. The parrot was the last link binding him to the old life, from which he was glad to escape. He realized how narrow his existence had been, and drew a long breath of relief when Cæsar was comfortably buried in a corner of the garden.

It was like an April day, a south wind and dazzling white clouds drifting over a blue sky, and the minister seated himself underneath the apple tree. The grapes had all been picked from the vine which climbed to it. The apples also were gone, with the exception of one large red apple, which for some reason had been neglected. John Gray was looking up at it, when he heard a door slam in the next yard, and footsteps on the garden path. Then came the sound of a voice singing:

*"Au près de ma blonde
Qu'il fait bon, fait bon, bon, bon."*

It was the same song that Alice Hale had sung the first day he had seated himself on the old settee, the song of which he had then so greatly disapproved. To-day, however, it seemed different, and to suit the place and the singer. She was evidently looking over her garden, probably planning some preparation for the winter. He could hear her steps as she moved about, and she started to sing

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the same verse over again, but she suddenly stopped, and said, almost in a whisper, "Oh! what a lovely apple, I wonder if I could reach it." She went away toward the house and a moment later the minister could hear the rattling of a stepladder, the top of which soon appeared on the fence over his head. He kept quite still, enjoying the prospect of taking Alice at a disadvantage, and he made no movement when her head appeared. She climbed to the top of the ladder, and reached for the apple, but it was beyond her grasp. She looked at the windows of the parsonage with a grimace, and stepped on to the edge of the fence. Then, standing on the tip of her toes, her fingers closed around the tempting fruit. Unfortunately, in her eagerness she lost her balance, and, smothering a scream and clutching on a branch, came sailing down with a shower of leaves. She landed fairly on her feet, but staggered and would have fallen had not Gray caught her in his arms. He held her but a second, and released her with —

"Well, Miss Hale, I've certainly caught you in the act."

In spite of her fall, she still held the apple in her hand, and for a moment stood flushed with her efforts and confused at her detection. Only for a moment, however, and then she said:

"It was mean of you not to let me know you were there."

"Why should I," asked the minister, "when you were stealing my fruit?"

"Will you give it to me?" she asked, holding out the apple.

"I will not," replied Gray.

"Take it back, then."

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"I will not take it back."

"Why?"

"I cannot condone crime."

"Must I go to prison? Can't I 'square myself'?"

The penalty to be exacted was so obvious, even to the minister, in spite of his lack of experience, that he almost named it, but caught himself in time and said: "You've hurt your wrist. You're already punished enough."

"It's only a scratch," she said, taking a handkerchief from her pocket and stanching a few drops of blood that oozed from a scratch on her wrist.

"Shall I tie it up for you?" he asked.

"Mercy, no!" she replied.

"You'd better let me do it," he insisted, taking the handkerchief from her and tying it about her wrist. While this was being done and after, they were both silent, their minds going back to the day when they had their first interview in the studio. Alice was the first to break the silence.

"How shall I get back?" she asked. "I can't climb the fence, and if I walk out of your front gate and Abby Green sees me, the whole village will have the story before night."

"I did not think you cared for public opinion."

"I'm not much afraid of it," answered Alice. "I'm thinking of your reputation, and not mine."

"You are thoughtful," said Gray; "apparently we're in the same boat. I'll get the ladder from your garden. How will that do?"

"All right, get it."

The minister climbed to the top of the fence and, pulling the ladder over, placed it so that Alice could easily return, and a moment later she was back in her own garden.

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"Good-bye, Mr. Gray," she said; "thank you for my pardon, for saving my reputation, and, most of all, for the apple."

There was a sound of departing footsteps, of a closed door, and Gray was left with his manuscript. For some reason, however, he found himself strangely out of the mood for continuing on his sermon, and finally gave it up.

In the afternoon, John Gray made up his mind to talk with Ira about his plans for the club. Ira could not speak in meeting, but on practical matters he was more useful than any other member of the church. It was about his blacksmith shop that the men gathered almost as if it were a club. In front of the shop there was always in the afternoon a little group of men pitching horseshoes, and, when the minister came to the shop, he found a half-dozen of the villagers engrossed in the game. Passing by them with a word of greeting to each one, he found Ira working away in the light of his flaming forge. Ira could never be called enthusiastic, but he agreed with the minister that the village needed a club, and it was a good opportunity to take over the Daniel Webster quarters, with the furniture. They talked over various details, and the preacher was about to leave when there was a sound of rain on the roof, followed by a heavy shower, and he decided to wait until it passed over. The horseshoe pitchers had taken refuge in the livery stable, and the two men were alone together. As the preacher sat on a box near the forge, he felt a drop of water on his hat. He moved a little way, and there were several drops, and, looking about him, he noticed that the rain was dripping in many places. Suddenly an idea came to him, and he realized that this was the opportunity he had been looking for.

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"Why don't you shingle your roof, Ira?" he asked. "It leaks like a sieve."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Ira, coloring. "It's good enough as it is."

"That is n't your reason," declared Gray. "You won't shingle this roof because, if you do, the 'Paduca Panacea' sign must come off. Is n't that the truth?"

Ira hesitated a moment, and then replied: "Well, s'pose it is? Am I goin' to let Betsy think I've given in to her? I would n't do it for a thousand dollars."

"And you ought to be ashamed of yourself, too, for saying it," declared the preacher. "I've waited a long time for a good chance to talk with you on this matter, and it's come now. I've got a good text for my sermon. I don't mind telling you that I agree with Betsy that you ought never to have had that sign painted. It is hideous. The village ought not to have allowed it. I don't blame Betsy for not wanting to have those letters staring her in the face every time she sat down at her front window."

"Well," said Ira, "perhaps I was to blame, though I don't admit it. I had n't an idea it would worry her or I would n't have done it. But s'posing I was to blame, had she any right to say she would never speak to me as long as it stayed on this roof?"

"She was to blame, too," said the preacher, "but her fault came after yours. This leaky roof is making you uncomfortable every time it rains, and rusting up your stock. You know you'd have had it reshingled if it was n't for your quarrel with Betsy and your foolish pride. Here's your chance to be friends again."

"She does n't want to be friends with me," declared Ira sullenly.

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"You're mistaken in that," replied the minister; "she's sick of the quarrel and would like to make up."

"How do you know that?"

"She's told me so with her own lips."

"Then let her tell it to me," said Ira.

"She won't, and I don't very much blame her. You're a man anyway, and ought to be ashamed to quarrel with a woman. Besides, Betsy is high-strung and is not so responsible for what she says and does as you are, who are calm and sensible. Here is your opportunity to clean up the whole thing. Shingle your roof, as you have good reason for doing, and see if she does n't speak to you the first minute she has a chance."

"Well, I'll think of it."

"No, Ira, I don't want to leave the matter in this shape. You can just as well settle it now. You claim to be a Christian, and you know what the Bible says about forgiveness. Betsy is very unhappy, and is longing to be friends with you. Promise me you'll start the job tomorrow."

"I have n't got any shingles," demurred Ira, evidently more than half convinced.

"There's plenty of them in the lumber yard at the Junction," declared the preacher. "I saw them when I drove over with Jude a few days ago. Come, Ira, as your pastor and Betsy's, I ask you to do this."

"All right, Preacher," said Ira reluctantly, holding out his hand. "It's mighty good of you to go out of your way on a matter like this. I really think you're right. I'll do the shingling and give Betsy a chance to speak to me."

"That's splendid," declared Gray; "good-night, I'll run along. There goes Elder French, and I want to speak with him."

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The preacher expected David to take up the project of the club with enthusiasm, but though he agreed it was a good thing and promised to contribute to it, he was moody and unsympathetic. When they reached the preacher's gate, he was going along without stopping.

"Won't you come in?" asked Gray.

"No, thank you," replied David, "I've got some things to attend to at home."

"I don't want to intrude," said the preacher, "but I am disappointed not to have you as my right-hand man at the church. We are nearest of the same age, and you are the only one in the village that has had any opportunity for higher education. What is it that makes you hold aloof?"

"I am not holding aloof," replied French, almost sullenly.

"If you have anything on your mind, come and talk it over with me. I'll do my best to help you."

"I'm not asking help from any one."

"Your mother is troubled about you, too."

"I'm sorry for that. I want to carry my own load, and I'm asking no help from any one. Good-night, Pastor."

Up the hill he went, John Gray looking after him wonderingly.

CHAPTER XXII

By Saturday the Men's Club was arranged. Deacon Harding opposed it from the beginning, declaring that the meeting-house was the place for church members to gather, and that all clubs were immoral. Elder Crocker was prepared to die in the last ditch before he consented to it. He was still very sore about losing the rent on his building, and frothed at the mouth every time he thought of his brother officers breaking down his door. He never spent money more grudgingly than he did for these repairs.

John Gray's sense of humor had developed so that he took a certain mischievous pleasure in going to see Asa immediately after he had seen Ira, and talking with him about the club, without informing him that it was proposed to use the Elder's building. Asa greeted the minister very curtly. He had not liked him from the beginning, and his feeling of antagonism had grown against one so straightforward and sincere. They talked the matter over at some length, Asa following to the doorway to emphasize his final argument. Billy Bryan, the cat, rubbed his black fur against his master's legs, and received a kick that sent him down the steps. This was a very unusual reception, for the Elder really loved the cat, and only his extreme irritation made him brutal.

The preacher had decided that he would keep the secret until the last moment, and only when he had reached the sidewalk did he turn and say:

"Well, Elder, I'm sorry you're so down on this club, for I wanted to hire your whole building, up and down

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stairs, where the Daniel Webster Club was. Now, we'll have to go to Babson's instead."

At this the Elder's face was a study. His jaw dropped, and when he tried to speak, the words would not come. Fortunately at the moment there was a digression which gave him an opportunity to collect himself. The "Mal-tee" cat, that had so often, like Peri at the gate of Paradise, looked at Billy Bryan through the window, was watching in the narrow passage between Crocker's store and Abby Green's fence. He considered this his own special province. Billy Bryan's temper had been set on edge by the kick he had received, and spying the Peri close to his own bailiwick, he sprang at him.

Billy Bryan was a heavy-weight and the Peri not much more than a "feather"; but he was in splendid condition, and in his predatory wanderings had often been forced to fight for a morsel of food. The way he handled the pampered gentleman from the grocery store was a sight to be seen. He dug deep into Billy's soft hide with his sharp claws, and filled the narrow passage with wisps of bloody fur. Billy quickly realized his mistake, but he could not get away. The Elder, who came to his rescue with a stout stick, could not enter the narrow passage and did not dare to throw anything for fear he would hit Billy, and he was obliged to wait until his cat rolled out at his feet. The Peri escaped over the fence into Abby's yard without injury, leaving Billy a wreck in the Elder's arms.

It would have been difficult for the preacher to have said why his sympathies were with the outlaw, but he watched the encounter without any inclination to interfere, and was halfway across the street when Asa cried out:

"I don't take back a single word I said ag'in' the club,

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but if you will have it, you'd better be up on the hill near the church. It may keep the club from some deviltry. I'll let you have the building for thirty dollars a month."

"I'll think it over, Elder," said Gray, as he continued on his way across the street, "but I don't want you to do anything against your conscience. Besides, Babson has made us a better figure."

Now, John Gray had never beaten a man down in his price, but he took an unholy joy in squeezing Asa. He had reached his gate, before the Elder gathered himself together and cried out:

"I'm not sure but what I favor the club after all, an' my figgers will be twenty-four dollars a month."

John Gray shook his head, shut his gate, and when he reached his study gave way to hearty laughter. Asa took Billy Bryan into the store and dressed his wounds, feeling as sore as his beloved cat. He had been as badly punished by the preacher as Billy Bryan had by the Peri.

It was not until Saturday afternoon that the preacher closed the bargain with Asa for twenty-four dollars a month, and half the cost of the needed repairs; and that evening was the first meeting at the studio of what was afterwards called "The Saturday Evening Club."

Faith had discovered a big wall lamp with a reflector that gave a cheerful light. There was a crackling wood fire in the stove, and an old table had been covered with a red cloth and set for four people. On one end was a chafing-dish, and on the other a cold ham, with a potato salad in the middle. Jude was a little late, and there were sighs of relief when he pushed back the big door and entered. Faith took his hat, Alice his coat, and Gray offered him the rocking-chair in front of the fire. He demurred at first, but seeing their humor was to make him the guest

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of honor, he accepted their attentions gracefully. He was too vigorous, however, to sit long in an easy-chair. He had never seen a chafing-dish, and he eagerly watched Alice putting in various ingredients, and inquired:

"What will it be when it's done?"

"Chicken *à la* King," replied Alice.

"It's new to me," said Jude. "I've never seen it on the 'mennu' of the Mountain House, but it looks good an' it sounds fine."

"It is n't 'looks' that count," replied Alice. "It tastes like ambrosia."

"What's 'ambrosia'?" inquired Jude, puzzled.

"It's what the gods used to eat on Mount Olympus," declared the preacher.

"And they drank nectar," said Faith, "and here's some on the stove," pointing to a tall coffee-pot, which was steaming joyously.

"I s'pose you're 'joshing' me," declared Jude, with a broad grin, "but I don't care, if it does n't delay the game. Have you heard the news about Ira Harp an' Betsy?"

"No," replied Faith, "what is it?"

"They've made up. You see Ira's shinglin' the roof of his shop, an' the Panacea sign went off with the old shingles. That made the trouble between 'em. Betsy spoke to him to-day, an' everythin' in the garden's lovely."

"What did she say?" asked Faith.

"'It's a fine day,' or, 'It looks like rain,' or, 'Pass the butter.' Don't you see it did n't matter what she said as long as she spoke? You know, Pastor, we was talkin' 'bout hosses an' humans on the way over to the Junction. Well, marriage is like hitchin' up a pair of hosses in another way. Sometimes they don't pull together in the beginnin', but

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finally they work fine. I hope this'll be the way with Ira an' Betsy."

"Is there incompatibility of temperament among horses?" asked Alice, laughing.

"Sure," replied Jude, "an' sometimes you jest have to separate 'em."

"That reminds me," said the minister, "that the first day I met Jude, Redny Feathers suggested that he be elected to the office of marriage-maker for the village of Wesley."

"All right," said Jude, "if they'll pay me more than I get for drivin' the stage, I'll take the job."

"Jude, you'd make a mess of it," said Alice.

"I'd look after you first," said Jude. "I have Asa in mind for you. He's right across the street, he's got money, an', though no longer young, he's well preserved."

"Did n't I tell you, Jude, you'd make a mess of it? Asa is awful. I'd run away."

"Oh," continued Jude, "I forgot you was engaged to Fred Miller. He's got more cash than Asa, an' he's young an' han'some."

Now, this was more than Alice had bargained for, and her color deepened. She could not explain, so she continued to talk jokingly.

"Jude, the marriage constable should set a good example and be a married man himself. Why don't you take me?"

At this there was a hearty laugh, but Alice noticed how the preacher started and how keenly he looked at her when Fred Miller's name was mentioned. It was a real "bolt from the blue," and John Gray for a moment was stunned by it. But how did it matter to him? He had taken little part in the conversation, being content to

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listen to Jude and to enjoy his surroundings. To cover his confusion, he spoke of the painting which had disappeared from the easel.

"Is the picture finished?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Faith, "and it's wonderful. Jude took it away this morning."

"And Jude will probably bring it back with 'Collect' marked on it," declared Alice.

"If I do, I agree to pay the charge," said Jude. "I've a hunch that picture does n't come back."

"I'm sure it won't," added Faith. "We shall never see it again. Some rich man will buy it, and it will hang on his wall, making every other picture look like a chromo that is given away with a pound of tea."

"It's a very beautiful picture," declared Gray. "The studio seems vacant without it."

"You're hungry," said Alice; "you're vacant, and not the studio. When you've eaten my chicken *à la king* and drank four cups of Faith's coffee, you'll complain of vacancy no more. Everything's ready."

They all drew up to the table, the preacher asked a short blessing, and for a while they were silent. Jude, with his napkin tucked under his chin, easily distanced his competitors. When supper was over, however, and they were all gathered around the stove, he became garrulous again. Faith offered him a cigar, which he examined critically. It was Crocker's best, and labeled "Flor de Union." Jude called it "Flower de Onion," but smoked it nevertheless.

"Well," said he, "miracles will never cease. Last week I was drinkin' rye whiskey with the Daniel Websters, an' thought I could n't get on without it. Here I am to-night perfectly happy with a cup of coffee."

"With four cups of coffee, you mean, Jude," inter-

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rupted Faith. "It's hardly fair not to give me full credit for the compliment you paid me."

"Speakin' of miracles," continued Jude, ignoring the interruption, "there's several of 'em, as recorded in the Bible, that strain my faith to believe. There's Jonah in the whale's belly, an' Balaam's ass. 'Twould give me a shock if, when I was drivin' over to the Junction to-morrer, Impatience should turn 'round an' begin a conversation with me. It's a little hard to take in the walls of Jericho fallin' down when they blew the trumpets, but the most remarkable thing of all to me was the waters of the Red Sea partin' an' the children of Israel goin' over 'dry ground.' I'd 'a' thought 't would have been a mighty muddy walk for the Israelites, an' I can't see how the Egyptians could have driven their chariots until there was a chance for the road to dry out. Tell me, Preacher, do you really believe all them miracles, jest as they're told?"

"Jude," replied the preacher, "I'm off duty and supposed to be enjoying myself. I shall decline to answer any questions about miracles to-night."

At this there was very hearty laughter, in which Jude joined.

"It's the miracles of healing that interest me most," declared Faith. "I wish He was here now, and could cure poor Mrs. French. She's worse and suffering terribly."

"It's taking a lot out of David, too," said Gray. "He's pale and worried."

"Somethin's been troublin' Dave for more'n a year," declared Jude. "I hope he ain't got nuthin' on his mind besides his mother's sickness. Have you an' Alice noticed anythin'?"

He spoke to Faith, and she replied, "Yes, I've noticed."

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"He used to be such a jolly boy, too," said Alice. "It certainly spoiled David when they made an elder of him."

She looked at the preacher, and he accepted the challenge with —

"It need n't have made him sad. Elijah Belcher carries the responsibility of eldership with joy in his heart and a smile on his face. I called at David's house yesterday. He's got a substitute in his school, and is giving all his time to the care of his mother."

"It's awful," said Jude; "an' the wust of it is, she's goin' through all this sufferin' without any hope. The doctor gave her up long ago. Nuthin' can help her 'nless it's prayer."

"I would not deny the power and will of God to heal any physical ailment in answer to prayer," replied Gray seriously.

"I'd pray for a kind-hearted man to send me to a good surgeon through whose skillful hands God might work," said Faith, "just as you did with Tom Davis at the saw-mill."

"Yes," said Jude, "yesterday I brought him over from the Junction. He walked easy with a cane, an' says in another month he'll be as good as new. He's comin' to church to-morrow."

"I'm afraid Jude will need to go to a hospital himself," declared Alice, "after the awful supper he has eaten. Elder Belcher says Jude told the Advisory Board that 'all he wanted was a plain meal o' victuals and a moderate amount.' It may take the prayer of faith to save him."

"Don't joke like that, Alice," appealed Faith. "You don't mean it."

"Well, let's do something cheerful," insisted Alice.

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"Do you play checkers, Pastor?" inquired Jude, pointing to a checker-board on the shelf.

"I used to long ago," he replied. "Do you?"

"Does he!" exclaimed Alice. "Why, he's the champion of Wesley."

"Yes," chimed in Faith, "he's a sort of professor. He gives Alice and me lessons."

"Well, Jude, I'll take my first lesson to-night," declared Gray.

"Sure!" said Jude. He got the checker-board, pulled his chair up in front of the preacher, and for a while there was silence, except for the tap of the moving pieces. Even this stopped at last, and Jude remarked, slowly and rather solemnly: "Pastor, I don't see no move I can make. You've got four pieces to my two, an' one of yours a king. I give in. There was somethin' wrong in my calkerlation. Let's try again." This time Jude played with great care, but again found himself in difficulties, very much to the amusement of Alice, who stood by his shoulder. As she watched the play, her eyes frequently met Gray's, and there was the little sympathy of the silent exchange of thought, she for the moment forgetting her antagonism.

"Why, Jude," said she at last, with feigned commiseration, "you're off your game to-night. What's the matter?"

"My game's same as usual," replied Jude, "but I'm inclined to think it's not quite good enough to beat the preacher. I guess I'm up ag'in' a better player. I'll try once more, an' be sure." Jude studied long and carefully in his third game, but finally was forced to admit defeat. "I'm a good sport," he declared, "but I know when I'm licked. I ain't got no champion's belt, but if I had I should hand it over to the preacher with my compliments.

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I s'pose we oughter be goin', although I reckon I shan't sleep very sound to-night."

"I don't see how you could expect to," suggested Alice, smiling.

Jude, however, did not smile. "It is n't the supper, Alice," he explained, "an' it's no joke, either. It's public confession for me an' Faith to-morrer."

"Poor Jude!" exclaimed Alice. "I had forgotten. Well, it would n't trouble me at all. If every one in church confessed who's no better than you, there'd be no time left for the sermon." She said this looking straight at Gray, but failed in her attempt to draw him into controversy.

"Perhaps you'd like to come to church to-morrow," he said.

"No," she replied, "I'll stay at home, and pray that mercy, charity, and loving-kindness may be sent down from heaven to the Wesley Methodist Church."

Jude said "Good-night" at the parsonage gate, and added a "God bless you, Preacher!" and then, "God bless everybody!" That was Jude's soul, "God bless everybody."

When the stable door closed behind Jude, John Gray, instead of going into the house, went to the old seat in the garden, walking on the grass so as not to waken Linda. It was here that he had first seen Alice Hale with her white arms among the branches. The moon was floating through the fleecy clouds, the wind was still, and a whip-poor-will was calling in the oak grove by the river.

The news that Alice Hale was engaged to marry Fred Miller had at first stunned the preacher, but the feeling of numbness now disappeared and in its place there burned the sullen flame of jealousy. Alice Hale and Fred Miller! The coupling of their names was sacrilege. Yet it

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must be true, for she had made no denial. The preacher did not ask himself why this engagement meant so much to him, for he knew.

The consciousness that he loved Alice Hale had come to him like a great wave that submerged every other thought. He realized that he had long loved her. Was it with the first embrace and kiss, or had he loved her in some other world?

Strange to say, the flame of jealousy went out quickly. It was impossible to think of Alice as the wife of that smooth, glib, and self-satisfied little politician. God would not allow it. He, John Gray, preacher and idealist, was not worthy, but he must in some way win her love. What did she think of him? He knew how she had at first disliked and scorned him, but he was sure she was now at least his friend. She was working with him for Jude's regeneration. How warmly she had praised him for his victory over the Midianites!

He could see a light now in her window, and he rose and stood beneath it. She sat so that the shadow of her face made a perfect profile on the white curtain, her chin in her cupped hand. What was she thinking of? Perhaps of him. She rose, turned down the light, threw up the curtain and the window, and, leaning on the sill, looked up at the sky. The preacher held his breath and stepped behind the lilac bush. When he looked again the white form had disappeared.

He walked quietly to the gate, for he knew he could not sleep, and house and garden seemed too small to hold him and his great love. He walked slowly up the hill until he came to the church, its tower pointing heavenward. He caught his breath. At first it seemed to warn and almost threaten him. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with

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unbelievers," it seemed to say. But he spoke aloud, as if in answer to the challenge, "The unbelieving wife is sanctified by her husband."

She did not belong to the church, but was she an unbeliever? He was sure no one so good and kind could be without the Christ spirit. He would win her to the church and for himself, a double incentive. He was not the same John Gray whom she had despised. His mind went back to his early youth with its restraints. It was not his fault that his ideal of perfection made no allowance for the strength of temptation and man's weakness — Jude's "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" he had come to understand. The church was the very place where the weak and sinful could be helped.

He remembered his interview with the Bishop, and his "Without love, a man is only half a man." Well, he was a man, at last. He had broken through the narrow walls that had confined him when he came to Wesley. He had yielded to Jude's heart appeal, he had sided with Faith, he had fought the Midianites and won the battle. But all this was nothing. He loved.

He stood for a long time looking out to the hills, the moonlight smiling with hope, the wind whispering courage. It was almost daylight when he crept silently up the stairs to his room. He took the handkerchief from the drawer, pressed it to his lips, inhaled the faint fragrance, and fell asleep with it under his pillow.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Sunday of Faith's and Jude's confession dawned calm and bright. As John Gray walked up the hill to church, it seemed as if the whole world had made confession, had been cleansed and purified. The sky was swept clear of every cloud, and the sun sent down its benediction.

When he reached his little room, and knelt in prayer as was his custom, his heart was full of thanksgiving. He had thought it best to say nothing about Faith's and Jude's confession, for he had not been quite sure of Jude's presence, and he did not care to bring unsympathetic and curious people to the church. He was quite happy with the consciousness of his secret, as he looked down on his congregation.

They were singing the first hymn, "Oh, day of joy and gladness," when Faith and Jude came in, and went quietly to Jude's customary place in the back pew. They were hardly noticed when they entered; but Abby Green's bright eyes soon discovered them, and she passed the news until it went in whispers all over the church. Abby was a sentinel who was never caught unawares. Gray's eyes had met those of the "backsliders" at their first entrance, and sent a message of confidence and good cheer to them. Faith was pale, but gave him a wan smile. Jude, however, grinned cheerfully, and, when he took his seat, picked up the psalm quickly and sang it heartily. Faith did not sing at first, but when Jude put the corner of the hymn book in her hand, she sang too, not loudly,

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but her voice had a quality which could not be hidden. Deacon Harding boasted that he never turned his head and that he always kept his eyes on the pulpit, but at the sound of Faith's voice, Gray saw the blood rush into his face and the veins on his forehead stood out like whipcords.

When the hymn was ended, Gray prayed. Jude covered his eyes with his big hand, and Faith bowed her head against the pew in front of her, glad to hide her face from the curious gaze of the congregation. Gray's prayer was always simple, fervent, and confident. He spoke to God as a child to his father whom he loved and of whose love he was assured. He always spoke as if this father were very near. Beginning with an expression of gratitude, he followed with confession of unworthiness and sin, and ended with his petition. But on this Sabbath day he uttered little more than words of thankfulness for God's goodness. He read the fourth chapter of Second Corinthians, and Jude smiled up at him when he came to the verse which the stage-driver loved, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us."

The text for the morning was, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." When the preacher had spoken the familiar words, and paused, as he always did, so that his congregation could commit them to memory, he found himself looking down into the face of David French. It was white and drawn and haggard. There was something of the expression he had seen on his mother's face when she was suffering, and the resemblance between mother and son was striking. He noticed that Jude had taken Faith's little hand into his big palm, where it rested

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all through the sermon. The preacher emphasized the importance of confession in the scheme of salvation. He explained how in every faith it had always preceded forgiveness and absolution. When he said, "In spite of what I believe to be the evils of the 'confessional,' I think the Methodist Church needs something to take its place," Deacon Harding turned and looked at Elder Crocker. He spoke of the sinful soul as a closed room, foul and noisome. Confession was like the throwing open of door and windows to let the foul air escape and the pure wind of heaven enter. Confession was first necessary for salvation, and second, for spiritual help and growth. He explained why confession to God was not enough. He emphasized the obligation to man for restitution and the righting of a personal wrong. He declared that a general confession, such as, "I have come far short of the glory of God," was not sufficient. He called the attention of his congregation to the fact that a just God must forgive. "Sin is not only forgiven but forgotten by God. It is as if it had not been at all. We are 'cleansed from all unrighteousness.' The church should take back the repentant sinner, and forget his sin. The member of the church who points a finger of scorn at an erring brother or sister is guilty of a dreadful wrong. Which one of us could claim the right to cast the first stone? 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.'"

Uncleanness was the most perfect symbol of sin. The desire for purity was in us all. He told the story of Mary Magdalen, and quoted from Macbeth, "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." No, but God's grace could purify it.

When the announcements had been made, the minister ended with these words:

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"At the close of this service we will hear the public confession of a dear brother and sister, who have wandered from the fold of the church. 'Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance.' They are desirous by a public confession to purge their sins, beseeching forgiveness of Christ, and of their brothers and sisters in the Wesley Methodist Church. You are requested to remain after the service and extend to these repentant sinners the right hand of Christian fellowship, in token that He, who maketh intercession for us, shall blot their sins out of the Book of Life."

Jude spoke first, wishing to help Faith. "Brethren an' sisters, you all know me an' my besettin' sin. Year after year I have struggled against temptation, year after year I have wrestled with the Devil an' he has overcome me. Again an' again I have brought disgrace upon this church. I had 'bout given up hope when this good young minister came to Wesley. He took me in hand an' taught me how to tackle the Evil One. He knows the fine points of the game, an' now when the Devil tackles me, 't is his shoulders are put on the ground an' not mine. God forbid that I should boast, the glory is His, an' that of His under-shepherd. I don't know as I oughter say it, but I do not forget how a good Samaritan helped me, whose heart belongs to Christ if her lips do not confess Him. Last an' not least is the dear girl that sits beside me, who has sinned an' suffered. I don't want to forget the rest of my friends in this village, they're all my friends, and, in spite of my wickedness, I feel to-day like the psalmist when he said, 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.'"

When Jude took his seat, there was a rustle of appre-

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ciation and sympathy that went through the congregation. There were "Praise the Lord's," "Bless His name's," and "Glory Hallelujah's." But when Faith rose, the church became very still and cold. Gray could see the faces harden, and their expressions change from sympathy to scorn. Deacon Harding's face was like a rock, and Elder Crocker's was disfigured by a sneer. Elder French kept his eyes fixed on the floor. Of all the officers, Belcher only beamed sympathy and love. Mrs. Davis looked around with a motherly kindness, her Thomas with her, and Ira and Betsy Harp, sitting together for the first time in many months, were plainly on Faith's side. Mrs. Belcher was evidently not in accord with her husband, and Abby Green and Maud had on their faces expressions of contempt and disdain.

As the preacher's eyes wandered over his congregation, his heart was sad within him and hopeless as well, as he realized how slight had been the response to the appeal of his sermon.

Poor Faith could not fail to feel acutely the change in the atmosphere about her. Her eyes looked imploringly from one to another, then fell, but when she spoke, she looked straight at the preacher.

"I confess my sin, which is known to you all. I ask God's forgiveness and your love."

She sank back in her seat, very pale, but did not cover her face until the preacher led in prayer, first for Jude, then for her, and finally for his congregation; and they never forgot the preacher's prayer. He made their confession of sin, coldness, hard-heartedness, and uncharitableness. His tongue was like a lash as he spoke, and his congregation winced under his words. To a few it brought realization, but to many of them resentfulness.

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Then he pleaded to God for them. He laid them on the very steps of the mercy seat and prayed as he had never prayed before.

When the benediction was spoken, Jude and Faith came forward and stood in front of the pulpit. Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker did not wait at all, but started at once for the door, followed by Elder French. French, however, showed no signs of scorn, the expression on his face being a strange mixture which Gray could not decipher. The rest of the congregation came forward, one after the other, first Mrs. Lawton, who gave her hand to Jude, then to Faith, whom she bent forward and kissed. The Harps and Mrs. Davis were kind to Faith, as they were to Jude, but the preacher noticed how many shook hands cordially with Jude, but barely touched Faith's fingers as they passed her.

Jude noticed, too, but said nothing until Maud Green, after shaking hands with him, attempted to pass by Faith altogether. Before she could get away, however, Jude reached out and caught her.

"Maud," he said, in his pleasantest manner, "you forgot Faith. Shake hands with her, too."

Maud would have liked to defy Jude, but there was something in the tone of his voice that made her touch Faith's hand for a moment.

Mrs. Belcher came from the other side of the church, and had not seen the encounter between Jude and Maud. She walked by Faith as if she had not seen her, and held out her hand to Jude. Again Jude made his protest, this time more forcibly.

"Mrs. Belcher," he said, "you cannot take my hand until you have taken that of Faith first. Shake hands with Faith."

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For a moment she hesitated, but again Jude's will triumphed.

When they had all passed out, Faith and Jude went with Gray into his little room, and he prayed with them, asking God's blessing and help, and dismissed them with a benediction as long as his prayer.

CHAPTER XXIV

THAT night Mrs. French died. The next morning, when news came to John Gray, he went at once to the house of mourning. The undertaker's wagon was in front of the door, and he met him in the front hall, practical, bustling, important, going about his business as mechanically as any other man with an occupation, profession, or trade. It was like a dash of cold water to the minister, whose heart was full of love for the dead woman and full of sympathy for her son. The minister found David very calm and collected, and, though he listened to words of comfort respectfully, the preacher felt he was not needed and soon took his departure.

The funeral was on Tuesday and was attended by almost every one in the village, and many of the farmers and mountaineers, who had been recipients of Mrs. French's bounty and assistance. It was John Gray's first funeral service, and he had chosen to speak from the text, "This woman was full of good works." When he reached the house, it was nearly full, and he was given a seat in the front hall, where his voice could be heard in the upstairs rooms. The undertaker, with his assistant, was placing camp-chairs for the mourners, taking them from a high pile and opening them with many a creak and rattle.

Alice came with Faith, and was seated in the darkened parlor where a shaft of sunlight shone on her face through a gap in the curtains. Gray could see her plainly through an open door, and he watched her hungrily. How beautiful she was! How pure and sweet her face! She might not believe as did her neighbors, but it was not the face of

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an infidel. She believed something. It was the first time she had heard John Gray preach and pray, and they were both conscious.

When the house was filled to overflowing, many being forced to stand outside the door, Gray began the service with, "I am the resurrection and the life," and followed with verse after verse of consolation and hope of immortality, and the quartette sang, "Asleep in Jesus, blessed sleep." Then came a long prayer for resignation and a sympathetic expression of the virtues and the good deeds of the woman who had endeared herself to all around her. The preacher told how deep was her love of "God," and how broad her love for her "neighbors." Indeed, it was the latter that the preacher emphasized, quite unconscious that it was the presence of Alice Hale — his neighbor — that inspired him. To her intuition it was a wooing strangely sweet and insistent. He told of Mrs. French's love of flowers, of his promise to think of her when the arbutus bloomed in the spring, and of her faith that she would find heaven carpeted with flowers.

The house service ended by the singing of "Rock of Ages," Mrs. French's favorite hymn. Her resting-place was in a little plot of ground, sheltered by tall cypresses, and so near that the procession of mourners had not far to go. Close to her grave was the mound under which her husband slept, and there was a tall granite monument on which the name of "John French" was cut.

When this service was over, and the solemn "Dust to dust, and ashes to ashes," had been pronounced, the procession filed back to the house, where great preparations had been made for the entertainment of the mourners. It jarred on the sensitive spirit of John Gray to see the

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eating and drinking, and he soon went home to the parsonage. The sun was shining cheerfully, and the minister's eyes wandered down by the river to a cluster of oaks, under which, in the early springtime, the first arbutus was likely to bloom, and he was reminded of Mrs. French's prediction, "I shall never see the arbutus bloom on earth again," and of his promise to think of her when he found the first flower.

The next morning Gray called on David French, and found him just starting for the Junction.

"I am going up into the woods, where I have a shack, for two or three weeks," he said. "I have given up the Academy, and shall decide what to do with myself before I get back."

"I hope you will now follow out your plan to study for the ministry," suggested the preacher.

"That's given up for good," replied French, and before Gray could question him, he looked at his watch and said, "I'm sorry to leave you, but I have just time to catch my train. Good-bye, Mr. Gray, you were a great comfort to Mother. I'll talk with you when I get back." He climbed into his light carriage and drove up the hill, leaving the preacher wondering.

The Wednesday evenings in the minister's study had been a bone of contention from the beginning. Harding and Crocker opposed them, because it was a new thing, and argued that the confidential talk was "too much like confessionals." To some, however, it had been a real comfort to tell their sins, troubles, and mistakes, and to obtain advice and help. Maud Green had come every Wednesday night, rather to the minister's wonder. She had talked very intimately, revealing her inmost thoughts, and expressing her deepest emotions. She had decided that she

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could not give her maiden hand to Redny. She had come to the conclusion that her soul mate must be a man more intellectual and with a stronger religious feeling. She had not said in so many words that she would like to have a clergyman, but she had come very near it. The minister, in spite of his guilelessness, was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

Now, Linda considered herself the guide and protector of John Gray in all mundane affairs, and she had looked more and more suspiciously at Maud. She had, of course, seen the slippers, also a pair of suspenders, on which forget-me-nots had also been embroidered. She had noticed not alone that Maud came every Wednesday night, but that she stayed a long time. This evening, when Maud arrived, Linda was barely civil, and, when she went into her kitchen, she left the door ajar. She had never done this before. Maud did not fail to notice this neglect, and by some kind of mental telepathy conveyed the impression to Gray, who rose and closed the door.

Maud had got well into the story of her loneliness, her desire for goodness and her love of the beautiful, when Linda suddenly appeared, took the *Weekly Farmer* from the paper-rack on the wall, and walked calmly back to her kitchen, without a word and again without latching the door. The preacher was astonished, for Linda had never done a thing of this kind before, and he was astounded at Maud, for this lady, having a suspicion that John Gray was responsible for Linda's action, rose to her feet, her face crimson, and flounced out of the room without another word.

When she had gone, the preacher summoned Linda into the room, and said:

"Linda, have you forgotten that under no condition

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were you to come into this room on a Wednesday evening until the bell rang or I called you?"

"Yes, I remember," answered Linda calmly, although there were two red spots on her thin cheeks, "an' I s'pose I ought not to have come in, but Maud's eternal talkin' to you made me mad. Did you ever hear 'bout the ugly gal that was out drivin' with a feller, an' she said, 'Nobody loves me an' my hands are cold'? You never heard that story? Well, the feller said, 'God loves you an' — set on your hands.'"

With these words — the longest speech Linda had ever made — she went back into her kitchen, leaving Gray half angry and half amused.

A little later there came a young man from the lumber mill to talk about joining the church, and, when he was gone, Jude arrived. It was a Jude such as the preacher had never seen. His cheeks were gray, and the lines on his face were deepened. His jaw was set and his eyes had the expression of one in pain. He did not remove his coat and hat, nor did he take the seat in front of the desk.

"Pastor," he said, "it's come to a 'show-down.' To-night settles it." He took from his hip pocket a flat bottle. "Do you know what that is?" he asked.

"Probably whiskey," replied Gray, catching Jude's wandering eye with a fixed glance. "What of it?"

"Just this," replied Jude, dropping into a chair. "I found that bottle in my coat pocket Monday morning. You think 't was Pasc, an' p'r'aps it was, but who put it there does n't matter. For three days an' two nights that bottle has been temptin' me. It was like a real voice, whisperin' all the time. It would n't keep its mouth shut all day, an' it kep' me awake when I was tryin' to sleep at night. There's you an' Alice an' Faith an' the church an'

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my pride an' my conscience an' my promise, all pullin' one way, an' that little bottle the other, an' it's so strong that it's an even thing up to now."

"Well, Jude, I'm pulling all I can, and with the Lord's help, I think we ought to win out."

"I think the odds are ag'in' you," declared Jude. "It seems to me as if one swallow from that bottle would be like a sight of heaven."

"You won't touch it, Jude?" appealed the preacher. "Shall we pray together?"

"No, Pastor, I've prayed constant for three days. I've got to fight this out myself. I don't believe a drink of that whiskey can be as good as it seems to me now. Nuthin' could be as good. I believe if I drank it, I'd be disappointed."

"Jude, you talk like a crazy man. Come, give me that bottle."

"No, Pastor, that bottle stays with me. I s'pose I'm half looney, but somethin' tells me if I take a swaller o' that whiskey an' throw the rest away, I shall win out."

"You know you won't stop with one drink," said Gray.

"I believe I can," replied Jude. "I'm goin' to take it anyway. If I finish the bottle, I'll get drunk for the rest o' my days. If I don't touch it now, I'll keep on hankerin' after it until, in the end, I'll give in."

"Come, Jude, give the bottle to me," begged Gray.

"No, Pastor," replied Jude, "I know I'm right. You set there an' pray, if you want to, an' watch me."

Jude pulled the cork out with his teeth, as Gray sprang at him, but he got a good gulp of the fiery liquor before the minister could stop him.

"Give the bottle to me," begged the minister again.

For a minute Jude did not answer, and they sat in

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silence. At last he spoke. "Here it is, Pastor. I'd just as soon have you hold it as me," and he placed the bottle on the desk. "This experiment o' mine has come out all right. I feel I'm a man at last, for I took that drink an' stopped. It ain't never goin' to git the best o' me ag'in."

"What shall I do with this whiskey?" asked Gray.

"Whatever you like," replied Jude. "It don't interest me."

Gray rose and went to the fireplace, but there he hesitated, and then came back. "Jude," said he, "I think I understand how you felt about taking that swallow of whiskey. I won't pour it on the fire, but I'll put the bottle in this drawer of my desk, with the understanding that the next drink you take is from this bottle."

"All right," replied Jude cheerfully. "It tasted good, but not near as good as I thought it would. I believe I've got the best of it at last. Anyway, you don't need to worry any more about me. I'm goin' back to the stable, an' to sleep. So long, Pastor," he said, taking the minister's hand in his big palm, and with a smile at the door before he closed it, he went away.

CHAPTER XXV

THE weeks went by and the whiskey bottle remained untouched in the preacher's desk. Jude became an honored member of the church, and no longer a source of worry to his friends. The Martin Luther Club had succeeded the Daniel Websters and was a flourishing institution, of which Jude was a shining light. The beer barrel had disappeared and both faucets delivered pure water. The hanging lamp in the center of the room was filled with oil instead of whiskey and gave out a clear light. The pool-table remained — to the horror of such irreconcilables as Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker. Elder Belcher, however, was very fond of the game, and his portly figure was often seen bending over the table.

Every Saturday night, however, Jude spent with Alice, Faith, and the minister in the studio. They were very happy evenings, John Gray developing a spirit of gayety which led him to many good-natured arguments with Jude, who pretended to be shocked at his pastor's unministerial words and acts. There were times when the antagonism between Alice and the preacher burst into flame, but this was not often. On the day that she had dropped over the fence almost into the preacher's arms, there had been a tacit agreement for a temporary truce, although there was always the subtle sense of the duel, and each watched the other as if expecting a challenging "*en garde*." In the church and the village there had been pitched two camps: those who were more and more fond of the preacher, and those who were more and more opposed to him. Between these camps there was a grow-

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ing hostility, and there were signs that they might come to battle soon. No one denied John Gray's power to preach. His church was filled on Sundays, the evening meetings were successful, and the collection was large. The clock had been fixed, and it kept such good time that the whole village, and particularly Elder Crocker, was proud of it. This did not prevent the Elder from nursing a very healthy dislike of the one who had paid for its repair.

John Gray was conscious of Asa's antagonism, of Deacon Harding's disapproval, and of Pasco Tripp's intense hatred. The preacher realized that he had utterly failed to convert or reform Pasco. To ease his conscience, he had called at the stable, but had been met with a torrent of abuse and a pitchfork in a pair of nervous hands. He had given his message, nevertheless, and tried honestly for a reconciliation.

"Get to hell out of this!" had been Pasco Tripp's final words.

The minister did not know, however, that his most vindictive enemy was none less than his former admirer — Maud. Since the evening when she thought John Gray had arranged for Linda's interference, Maud had not drawn a happy breath. Her very heart was full of bitterness, and she lay awake planning the preacher's downfall. She watched his every movement, hoping to find him guilty, at least of an indiscretion. From her front window, her eyes followed his out-going and in-coming. She noticed that he was calling more and more often at the studio, and kept a memorandum, showing the length of his visits.

The preacher had, indeed, become a very frequent caller at the studio, being received by both Faith and Alice. One afternoon only he had found Alice alone, and

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had stayed two full hours, to his gratification and that of Maud as well, who kept the record. They had not talked very much, but Gray felt he was gaining Alice's confidence. Was she pledged to Fred Miller? He did not dare to ask, and the diamond on her finger blinked malevolently at him.

It was evident to Faith that the minister was attracted by Alice, but Alice kept her own counsel and even Faith could not guess how her friend felt.

Poor Faith did not have a happy time. In spite of her Methodist "absolution," she was not really forgiven by the members of the church, and her sin was certainly not forgotten. Almost all the women in Wesley and some of the men were unfriendly. Mrs. Lawton did all she could to help her, calling on her often and taking her to drive behind her fat pony. Betsy Harp and Mrs. Davis were friendly, but such spotless saints as Mrs. Belcher, Abby, and Maud "passed by on the other side." Her father never looked at her.

It was approaching Thanksgiving Day, and the members of the Baptist Church were to join the Methodists in a union service at the Methodist Church. One morning John Gray was working on the latch of his front gate, when Mr. Warner passed. The preacher greeted him with —

"Good-morning, brother, I hope we'll have a good attendance on Thanksgiving Day."

Mr. Warner stopped, and with a brave attempt at a smile, replied:

"I hope we will, but my congregation won't help much. How many do you suppose there were last Sunday?"

"I have n't the least idea," declared the preacher. "I hope a hundred."

"There were just nine," said Mr. Warner. "Your

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preaching has been so good that you've drawn almost all my people away from me."

"Is that true?" exclaimed Gray. "I had no idea. It's dreadful. It must be stopped."

"How can you stop it?" inquired Warner. "It is n't your fault. You can't preach as badly as I do if you try."

"I'll do something," declared Gray.

"You can't do a thing," said Warner, "and I don't blame you. Here's my hand on it. You're one of the best men I've ever met, and the fairest. I don't grudge you your success."

He shook the minister's hand heartily, and went down the hill, leaving Gray in deep thought. A few minutes later he hurried into his study, laid aside some loose sheets of paper on his desk, and started to write a new sermon to be preached on the following Sunday. He wrote until dinner-time, and after dinner until the clock in the steeple struck "three." He was looking out of the window when he saw Alice Hale emerge from her back door, carrying her easel, canvas, palette, and box of paints. She crossed the meadow back of her house on her way to the river. He had often seen her do this, and knew that she was painting the picturesque spot where the brown water ran between the mossy stepping-stones.

Until to-day he had never thought of following her, but at the moment there came to him an intense desire to be with her alone. He had nothing especial to say, and no excuse to offer for intruding. He realized it was a foolish wish, gave it up, and sat down to his sermon again. He found, however, that he could not write a word, and his longing to be with Alice Hale would not leave him. Was it possible for him to appear before her as if it were a

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chance meeting? Suddenly an idea came to him, and in another moment he was out on the street, hurrying up the hill, by the church. He crossed the wooden bridge, and then, turning to the left, he plunged into the woods. His plan was to make a *détour* and approach the stepping-stones from the mountain. 'T was a long walk, but he was glad to get a good tramp. Beginning with the time when his short legs with difficulty kept up with Professor Elton Jones's long strides, until his arrival at Wesley, nearly every fair afternoon had found him among the hills. The affairs of the Wesley Church had so occupied him, however, that he had rarely been able to get away, even for an hour.

He did not know the paths, but made his way through the trees, finding here and there a path. Higher and higher he climbed, swinging a little to the left, until he found himself well up the mountain-side. Here he decided to descend, but found his way blocked by thick underbrush through which he forced his way. He was emerging into open ground when he heard behind him the sharp report of a rifle and his hat flew off his head and fell at his feet. He picked it up and found two holes where the bullet had entered and departed. He had felt a strange sensation in the top of his head, and realized how near he had come to death.

His first thought was that a careless hunter had taken him for a deer. To suddenly find one's self under fire is not agreeable, and the preacher turned indignantly in the direction from which the shot had come. But was it a careless hunter? He remembered seeing Pasco pass very early in the morning with his rifle in his hand. Was it possible that Pasco's hatred would inspire him to cold-blooded murder?

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John Gray was no coward and, careless of danger, he resolved to find out. He held his hat before his eyes and, taking the line from the two bullet holes, he forced his way through the bushes to the right until he came to the open forest. There was no one in sight. There was no sound to break the silence but the whispers of the wind. As he stood irresolute, he saw something glisten among the maple leaves almost at his feet. He picked it up and examined it carefully. It was an open flask half full of whiskey. It had the initials "P. T." plainly stamped on the leather. Evidently Pasco had been refreshing himself, had caught sight of his enemy, had dropped the flask, and taken a quick shot. It was a good one, too, for the preacher had been a hundred yards away and moving rapidly. In his haste Pasco had left the flask on the ground and fled.

John Gray realized that he had escaped death by a bare inch, and he did not want to die. At the moment heaven presented no attraction compared to an earthly love. In spite of the varied emotions which had possessed him, he had not for a moment forgotten his quest, and unless he hurried he would miss Alice Hale after all. He put the flask in his pocket and retraced his steps. Taking long strides down the mountain-side, he came to the edge of the wood, and, peering through the leaves, was relieved to discover Alice's gray dress.

She saw him the moment he emerged from the shadow of the trees, and smiled, but went on with her painting. She was not the least deceived concerning the chance meeting which John Gray had planned so elaborately. Yet so honest was she, however, that she did not even express surprise when the preacher came to the stepping-stones, and she looked up and said:

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"Be careful, they're very slippery, and I don't want to rescue you from a watery grave."

"Would you rescue me?" he asked, when he reached her side.

There was more meaning in the tones of his voice than he realized. She hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

"I think I would, and to prove it, I'm going to try to rescue you from something worse than a ducking." She spoke seriously.

"What is it?" he asked wonderingly.

"You're walking on slippery stones in your church. You're likely to get a cold plunge."

"What do you mean?"

"I suppose you know that there are many of your people who disagree with you — who do not like you?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Gray, smiling; "I know Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker are not over-fond of me."

"And they have their followers," declared Alice.

"I must do what I think is right. I must preach what I believe to be true."

"Of course you must, but you need not make unnecessary enemies. You're not a diplomatist."

"Need a Methodist minister be one?" inquired Gray, smiling again.

"He must; 'tis a pity, but a Methodist minister needs more diplomacy than an ambassador to a foreign court. You've done some things which please everybody, some that please nobody, and there are others concerning which your congregation is divided."

"Like what?"

"Of course, your most popular act was the fixing of the

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clock. Everybody approved this, as they did your sending Tom Davis to the hospital. I saw him yesterday, and he says he will soon be as well as ever. On your raiding the Daniel Webster Club your church is divided. Most of the men like you for it and some of the women, but many of them thought you were too aggressive. Tell me did you say 'damn'?"

"I did," he answered. "Pasco threatened that some one would get hurt 'damn bad' if we did not give up the dummy Bible, and I said some one would get hurt 'damn bad' if they tried to take it — quoting Pasco."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Alice. "I wish I could have been there to hear you. The word is frequently used in the Bible. It's a pity there's no poet in Wesley to write an epic on the midnight foray against the Daniel Webster Club."

"You're laughing at me now," protested Gray, the smile leaving his face. "Do you know, I'm getting tired of being laughed at?"

"Not really laughing," she replied. "You said something that night about 'doing more than preach against sin.' I like to have a man do more than talk, no matter what his profession is."

"Tell me something that made only enemies," asked Gray.

"When you preached about the prodigal daughter, hardly one of your congregation approved. You were properly punished, too, for you stole that idea from me. You really did not help Faith, either."

"I'm sorry for that," said Gray. "I wish I could help her. I wish something would happen to make Faith happy."

"No one can help her," said Alice. "She still clings

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to the hope that the man will come to love her and will return and marry her. I myself am hopeless, but I would not for the world take away Faith's belief." She hesitated for a moment, and then, looking keenly at the preacher, said, "I wonder if you will be very angry if I tell you something."

"You can say whatever you like to me."

"You are calling at the studio too often."

In spite of his promise, the minister flushed at the words.

"If you don't want me to call, I certainly will not trouble you."

At this Alice laughed. "You have broken your promise, which is very wrong — for a minister. I knew you would lose your temper when I told you that. Of course we like to have you call. Faith was saying only this morning she did n't know what she would do without your visits."

"And what did you say?" inquired Gray.

"I said you'd have to stop."

"Why?"

"Because the people are beginning to talk."

"And it's my reputation you're thinking of again, as you told me in the garden?" asked John Gray grimly.

"Yes, it's your reputation," answered Alice earnestly. "You're honest and sincere, and you're doing a good work here in Wesley. When you came, you were as hide-bound as Asa himself, but every day you have become more liberal and sensible. I am anxious about your reputation, and — " At this she paused, with a little catch of her breath, and finished with, "I'm afraid it's too late to save it now."

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As she spoke, Gray followed her glance and saw Maud Green approaching along the river path.

Now, Maud, peering through her blinds, had seen Alice Hale cross the fields, and had also seen the preacher looking out of his window, although only half his face was visible. She had seen him stride up the hill, and had guessed his plan. She had donned her hat and coat and, hurrying after the preacher, was just in time to get a glimpse of him as he plunged into the woods. She had gone down the hill as far as the wooden bridge, and then taken the river path, planning a second "chance appearance" of her own. She knew, of course, it would not deceive anybody, for the river path was almost never used except on warm Sunday afternoons in summer, and then by wandering lovers. When Maud came to a turn in the path from which she could plainly see Alice Hale, she sat herself down behind a friendly bush and waited. Never an Indian in the old days had stalked his enemy and lain in wait for him more patiently than did Maud, and in no Indian's breast had the fire of revenge burned more fiercely. When the minister arrived, she could hardly restrain a shout of triumph. She waited a little while, then rose to her feet and continued her walk, with as fair an appearance of unconsciousness as she could assume.

Both the preacher and Alice were startled, but only the preacher showed his embarrassment.

"Good-afternoon, Maud," said Alice cheerfully.

"Good-evening," replied Miss Green, with a strong accent on the second word, although the sun had not yet set.

Alice paid no attention to Maud's insinuation, but said, "The path is muddy farther on. Won't you go across the fields with us?"

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John Gray had also said "Good-afternoon," but Maud took not the least notice of his greeting. Only by biting her lips could she keep herself from bitter words. Carrying her head high and with a very disdainful curve of the lip, she went on her way, evidently preferring muddying her shoes to soiling her pure spirit by associating with moral outcasts. When she had disappeared around a curve in the path, Alice turned to the preacher and said:

"Well, Mr. Gray, are you aware of the sad fact that two perfectly good reputations have this moment been hopelessly lost?"

"They have? Why?"

"Why!" exclaimed Alice. "We have met here by appointment in this lonely spot."

"There was no appointment."

"There must have been. By no chance could two human beings have come to a place like his. Furthermore, it is after dark."

"It is not dark," contradicted Gray. "The sun is still above the horizon."

"I am sorry," continued Alice, "but that is an optical illusion. Maud happened to be walking along the path. She was searching for chestnuts; there is a little clump of them by the side of the path. She had no idea we were here. How could she? She would have given anything — anything in the world — not to have seen us. Yet, having seen us, she considered it her duty to tell Elder Crocker, who does not love you, and also her Aunt Abby, who will report the tale with variations to all who will listen. And I can assure you there are few ears in Wesley that will not welcome so interesting a scandal."

"Is it as bad as that?" asked Gray, rising to his feet. "It does not frighten me."

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"It is as bad as can be," declared Alice seriously, "and I am very sorry. It will not help you to make your 'perfect church.'"

"I'm afraid that dream has vanished," said the minister, "though there are plenty of good people in it. How about your ideal of a perfect picture?"

"The best picture I shall ever paint is in New York," answered Alice. "I have asked a large price for it. Jude will bring it back to me in a few days."

"I don't believe he will," declared the minister, "and whatever happens, we must not give up our ideals."

To this Alice made no reply, but she removed her canvas from the easel, and gathered her things together. He took them from her and they started across the meadow. Neither spoke until they had nearly reached the stone wall which ran back of the Frazer Place. John Gray climbed over first, and held out his hand to Alice. For a moment she waited, then she gave him her hand, and jumped down on to the garden path. As they were parting at the studio door Alice exclaimed:

"What has happened to your hat?"

"A chance shot from a careless hunter," replied Gray.

She looked into his eyes, her own dilate with horror, her face pale to the very lips. "The Wesley Methodist Church came very near losing its pastor, and you to a settlement of all your questions concerning death."

She turned abruptly and went into the house before he could answer, but he noticed that her hand trembled as she reached for the latch of the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE night after the meeting at the stepping-stones, Gray did not go to bed until long after midnight. For a time he was not only a Methodist minister, but a man overcome by his first love, with the primitive desire of possession. The memory of the first meeting in the studio came back to him. Alice was again in his arms. He was conscious of the fragrance of her hair, and her kiss burnt on his lips. He felt that it was wise to wait longer before he spoke. Yet could he?

She could not be so kind to him unless she loved him. How pale she had grown as she saw the bullet holes in his hat! He went to sleep confident and happy, but when he woke the next morning in the black hour just before dawn, he began to doubt. Any woman would show emotion at the thought of death. Why should he be fortunate enough to win one so beautiful? Might there not be some one else who wanted her, and whom she loved? The ghost of her engagement to Miller came to haunt him, and with it an agony of jealousy. The ring on her finger mocked him in the dark. Fred Miller was young and handsome and rich. He had obtained distinction by his election to the Assembly. He had known Alice since childhood. So anxious was the minister that after breakfast he watched for Jude, stopped him and begged for a ride, explaining that he wanted a little fresh air and would walk back after they had gone a mile or two.

It was not difficult to guide Jude's mind in the direction he wished. As they passed the club-house, the minister inquired concerning its old members, first about Pasco,

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then Tom Lunn and Redny, ending with Frederick Miller.

"Fred's laid low ever since the raid," declared Jude. "He's lettin' folks forget he was caught, an' most of 'em have. I've wondered how Alice Hale felt about it."

This was rather a shock to the minister, but, as Jude did not continue, he inquired, "Why should it matter particularly to him how Alice Hale feels about it?"

"Well, seein' they've been engaged for a half-dozen years or more, it's nateral enough he should be anxious. Of course, engagements don't always mean marriage, an' she was n't more 'n a child. Nothin' to keep them from marryin' if they're both willin'. I wonder what's the hitch."

The minister had obtained the information he sought, but it certainly was not what he wanted. He listened in silence while Jude "prattled" concerning other things, but these words made no impression whatever on his mind. He dropped off the stage-coach, walked back over the road, and plunged into the woods at the same spot he had chosen the day before. He had forgotten how near he had been to death. Following his footsteps as far as possible, he came home by way of the stepping-stones, and grieved Linda by his lack of appetite for dinner. His first inclination was to go to the studio, but he remembered Alice's mandate that he must not call so often, and he was wise enough to decide that he would wait until Saturday evening before he saw Alice again.

When the evening came, he was greeted cordially by both Faith and Alice, and was encouraged by the expression of Alice's face, by the light in her eyes, and a little flush of color that came into her cheeks.

The church clock was striking "six" when Jude pushed

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the barn door back on its creaking wheels. The lamp on the wall, with its bright reflector, streamed full on his face, as usual lightened by a broad smile. They all welcomed him, Faith and Alice from the table, where they were concocting a Welsh rarebit, Faith as chief priestess, and Gray from the box from which he was lifting a stick of maple wood to feed the fire.

Jude took the easy-chair by the stove. It was his habit to begin the evening with a question from which there frequently followed a discussion to which all contributed. He began with —

"I'd like to know if there's any hoss-trottin' in heaven? What do you think, Mr. Gray?"

"There may be," answered the preacher, "but I don't remember anything in the Bible that tells about it."

"Well," continued Jude, "you told us last Sunday that our unsatisfied earthly longings, if right ones, would be fulfilled in heaven. You said that those who loved music an' had cultivated their voices would be able to sing more wonderful songs. Maud Green looked conscious, an' I suppose she was thinkin' of that top note she can't quite git here an' now. You spoke of the artists that could n't paint the pictures they dreamed of, an' I s'pose you was thinkin' of Alice here. Now, when I go to heaven, I want a hoss, a bay mare, a trotter standin' some eighteen hands high. I don't favor pacers myself. A hoss of perfect disposition an' action, what could show her heels to all the other trotters in heaven. That's my unsatisfied longin', jest as I s'pose Dave French would like baseball an' make a home run every time he come to bat. Shall I git my bay mare in heaven? What do you think?"

"You might," declared Gray, "but I doubt her being faster than all the others. You see Pasco would probably

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have the same unsatisfied longing, and you could n't both win. Perhaps you'll become so unselfish that you'll prefer to have some one else carry off the palm."

At this Jude shook his head, and Alice suggested:

"In the first place, streets paved with gold would be slippery for speeding; and in the second place, it's probable that Pasco will be in a place where the roads are of asbestos, and if there are any horses they will be vicious, balky, and spavined."

Now the minister did not like to hear Alice speak like this. He knew she did it to tease him, and the mercury in his thermometer of love fell several degrees as he listened.

Jude was silent for a while, evidently in deep thought, and then he said:

"There's a heap about hosses an' chariots in the Old Testament. Revelation, too, tells about three hosses, a red an' a white an' a black hoss. But it also speaks of those what 'sat on them.' So as far's the Good Book goes, we can only be sure of saddle hosses, an' those are not my kind."

"And they were only meant for types and images of other things," declared the preacher.

"Yes, I know," said Jude, "an' speakin' of hosses, what do you s'pose put me in mind of them to-night?"

"They're always on your mind," remarked Alice.

"The brown mare balked with you again," suggested Faith, as she stirred the rarebit vigorously.

"No," replied Jude, "she come right along to-night like a real lady. I've been watchin' the race this afternoon between Pasco an' them New York fellers at the fair grounds, an' 't was a corker."

"Which won?" asked Alice. "Tell us all about it."

"No," contradicted Faith, "the rarebit's done and it's

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quite tough enough without cooling off. The cheese was n't right."

At this Jude laughed, and declared, "The cheese is always wrong if the rarebit turns out bad, but I'm hungry enough to eat a rubber boot to-night, so it won't much matter."

They gathered around the table, and the conversation was broken and desultory until the rarebit was consumed, with a large quantity of cold ham and potato salad. It was only after they were all seated in front of the crackling stove, and Jude had lighted his pipe, that he told the story of the horse-race. Occasionally his auditors put in a word, but as a rule when Jude got well started they were content to sit still and listen.

"Pasco Tripp's got a little mare that he named 'Goldie B.' Some says 't was after a girl o' Pasco's that did n't live anywhere near here. But folks that watched her trot got to callin' her 'Honey Bee,' or the 'Bee,' for short. Where he got her nobody knows, an' Pasco won't tell. Anyway, she ain't got no pedigree that folks knows about. She's a little hoss, skersely out o' the pony class, round an' shapely, an' you'd hardly take her for a trotter if you saw her on the street. She looks like gold when the sun shines on her. I believe she's got some Arab blood, for her legs are mighty fine, an' her tail sweeps the ground if it ain't tied up. She's a 'leg trotter,' an' the purtiest mover I ever saw. Her gait's so steady you could place a glass o' water on her back an' not spill it. There's plenty faster hosses on a mile track, but on the half-mile circle, she's a wonder, an' never's lost a race. She's made a lot o' money for Pasc. He's awful proud o' her, an' he comes nearer lovin' her than anythin' else on earth."

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"Is n't it late for a horse-race?" asked Gray.

"Yes," replied Jude, "all the regular races was over long ago, but it's never too late for Pasc. He keeps it up all winter, with a sleigh along the road or on the lake when the ice gits thick enough. These New York fellers brought some hosses to the county fair a coupla months ago, an' won everythin' — almost. The 'Honey Bee,' though, stung them good an' plenty, an' beat the city hoss in straight heats without sweatin' a hair. Pasc smiled at them in the irritatin' way he has, and said, mos' politely, 'Come an' see us ag'in with somethin' a leetle faster an' git your money back.' They 'lowed they would. The hoss they fetched with them was an old feller, an' he looked it. He was gray, an' a gray three-year-old looks older'n any other color three times its years. They claimed 'Henry D.' was of age — that is, twenty-one — an' had a right to vote. He'd been sent mostly in the West, an' I'd never heard o' him."

Faith looked up from the stocking she was mending, and asked, "But, Jude, how did you get away from the stage?"

"I was in luck," answered Jude. "I found Fred Miller at the station, an' he wanted to watch the race as well as me. So I put the gad to the team, an' arrived just as they were scorin' for the first heat."

At the mention of Fred Miller's name, the minister quite unconsciously turned and looked at Alice as if he would read the deepest secret of her heart. She was a lady of much self-control, but she could not restrain her color, and anger at herself for this lack of restraint caused her to blush worse than ever. There was nothing she could say or do, and after a while Jude continued:

"I drove the stage into one of the sheds, an' we hurried

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over to the gran' stan' where we could get a good squint at the wire. 'T wa'n't, of course, like a Fair day, with crowds o' people about, an' the band playin' an' fellers yellin' 'bout peanuts an' lemonade an' hot dogs. Every man there thought he knew somethin' 'bout hosses, an' most of 'em had a little cash they was willin' to risk to back their judgment. Most of it was in favor of the 'Bee,' an' 't was offered at better 'n evens with practically no takers. Some of it belonged to church members, too, though 't wa'n't bet open. I did n't have enough to make it wuth riskin', so I resisted temptation, an' felt an' looked virtuous. Fred Miller had a roll the size o' my arm, an' he wanted to put the whole of it on the 'Bee.' But I advised him to wait a little."

"Self-righteousness always seems to me the meanest sin of all," said Alice. "Don't you think so, Mr. Gray?"

"It is a sin very hard to overcome," replied the minister. "But I should not care to measure it, in comparison with others."

This answer, referring so plainly to Alice's question, "Do you dare to measure sin? Have you the rule, with moral feet and inches marked upon it?" took her breath away, and Jude continued:

"At first sight, it did n't look a race at all. 'Henry D.' was a big hoss, hobbled an' booted an' weighted, apparently just took out of a tip-cart. He had two good legs, an' two bad ones, an' the bad ones could n't keep up — the result bein' unsatisfactory. O' course, Fred bein' a politician, he knew 'most everybody, an' it took him five minutes to shake the hands that probably had been extended to him 'bout 'lection time, an' not held out in vain. Jest as we got seated, down came the hosses, nose an' nose. There's not much to be said 'bout that fust heat.

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The 'Bee' had the pole, kep' it, an' every time 'Henry' tried to pass her, in the straight, he could n't. Fred left me to go into the judges' stand while the hosses were bein' rested, an' most o' the fellers 'round me was complainin' that they had wasted their time to see a procession. I wa'n't so sure. Fred come back an' said the judges thought 'Henry' did n't have no chance, but there was some that differed. A coupla city fellers appeared 'bout this time, that had some 'Henry D.' money — all big bills for convenience in carryin'. An' they quietly wandered through the crowd, backin' that city hoss, fust gettin' two to one, but gradually bein' forced to put up seven to ten. An' 'bout this time all the Wesley money was gone. Fred wanted to take a flyer on the 'Bee,' but I stopped him. I did n't like the looks o' things. The big gray wa'n't pulled in the fust heat, but he certainly wa'n't forced. If I'd only seen the hosses, I might still have fancied the 'Bee.' 'T was the men that was backin' him that caught my eye. They was two quiet little sports that went 'bout their business as if it was a business, not a bit o' fun, as for me an' Fred an' the other farmers. They put up real money, an' insisted that real cash be handed to Jed Starbuck, what everybody could trust.

"When the bell rung for the second heat, 'Honey Bee' was the fust to show, as usual driven by Pasc. He jogged by, his long legs danglin', with a straw in his mouth, an' wearin' a bright red cap. Some says he chose this color to startle the other hosses, an' Fred Miller said it looked like a prairie fire. Pasc nodded to the judges as he passed, an' called out somethin' to Fred, showin' how cock-sure he was o' winnin'.

" 'Henry D.' was driven by a little feller old enough to be his grandfather, if 'Henry' was twenty-one years old.

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His hair was gray, he was round-shouldered, an' he wore goggles that covered 'most his whole face. I noticed a big change in 'Henry,' too. His limp was gone, an' he moved easy. They scored only once and was off, the 'Bee' at the pole havin' the best o' the start, an' I would n't have sent 'em, but the judge was a friend of Pasc's, an' willin' to give him all he dared. 'Henry tried to pass at the first turn, an' came mighty near gittin' by. When they straightened out, he came more'n near. The way that big hoss come to life an' struck out was a caution to cats. The 'Bee' did her best, but 'twas a good big hoss ag'in' a good little hoss, an' there's only one answer. When they passed us the fust time round, 'Henry D.' was leadin' by a coupla lengths an' the 'Bee' trailin'. She made her try on the last turn, an' when the hoss swung wide, she came inside as spry as a fox, but 't was no use. 'Henry' won comfortable, by a length. It was plain to me which was the best hoss, an' Fred thanked me for tellin' him to hold on to his cash."

It was extraordinary that Fred Miller's name should be mentioned so often that evening, when it had seldom been spoken since the night of the raid. The minister had not looked at Alice since the first time, but a twinge of jealousy came to him again and again.

"When Pasco drove off to the stable, he looked worried. The race was for two hundred dollars a side, an' besides this, they say he'd bet a hundred more, an' Pasco is an awful bad loser. The farmers 'round us was worried, too, an' some of 'em tried to hedge, but 'twa'n't no use. O' course, 'Henry' might fall down an' break his leg or be struck by lightnin'. The last was mighty doubtful, for' there wa'n't a cloud in the sky, an' the sun was shinin' an' there was a nice breeze from the east. I noticed the wind

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from what happened in the last heat, an' what I'm goin' to tell you now is what Alice calls 'entry noo.'

"Jest as the bell rang to call 'em out, I saw Tom Lunn leave the stable, cross the track, an' sneak over to the last turn where there's a clump o' blueberry bushes growin'. I don't s'pose no one but me saw Tom Lunn, but, as I come mighty near bein' hung for manslaughter on his account, I can't keep my eyes off him. He's Pasc's most intimate friend. I can swear I saw Tom Lunn disappear in them bushes. Everybody was on edge, the track had been smoothed by the harrer, an' 'Henry D.' had jogged down to the judges' stand. He looked good, an' so did the 'Bee' when she came out a few minutes later.

"I was surprised to see how confident Pasco looked. He kep' the gray scorin' for a while, an' finally the judge sent 'em with the 'Bee' a full length in the lead. 'T wa'n't no use, though, for 'Henry' outfooted her doin' her very best. I was dum sorry for the little mare. When they passed under the wire the fust time, the gray had three lengths an' he had n't lost an inch when they come to the last turn.

"Here somethin' happened, an' I want you all to understand I don't say that Tom Lunn had anythin' to do with it. But suddenly out o' the bushes there come blowin' on the wind a big piece of newspaper, an' it caught the gray right in the face. He was as stiddy a hoss as I ever saw, but newspapers in his face was somethin' he wa'n't trained to meet, an' he went up in the air as if he was tryin' to climb the golden stairs. 'T was a bad break, too, not one where a hoss runs in somethin' like a two-minute gait, but near a standstill, an' the mare had a half-dozen lengths' lead when he got his feet again. I did n't s'pose the gray had a chance, I don't think Pasc thought so

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either, or he would have pushed the mare a little. But when the gray hoss started to trot again, he gave an exhibition such as I've never seen. He gained every stride, an' had caught the mare a hundred feet from home, his driver plyin' the whip an' yellin'. Now, for the fust time in all their races, I saw Pasc take the gad to 'Honey Bee.' He gave it to her good an' plenty, an' she shot out like an arrer. 'Twa'n't no use, though, the gray hoss passed under the wire a full length ahead, an' the race was over."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Alice, "I'm glad it is. I've been leaning forward and pushing as if I was driving the 'Bee.' I'm sorry she lost, in spite of Pasco's crookedness."

"And so am I," declared Faith.

"How do you feel about it?" asked Alice, turning to the minister.

"I'm glad the gray horse won," he replied. "He was fairly raced."

"That's been the way since the creation," said Alice. "The big horse beats the little mare, and man has the best of woman."

She said this, a challenge in her voice, but the preacher only smiled and asked, "Why is it that there is so much crookedness about horse-racing and about horse-trading, too?" He asked the question with a knowing smile, and Faith and Alice laughed aloud at Jude.

"Parson, I can't tell you," he replied. "The hoss is the noblest animal on earth, but honest men an' good men an' even Christian men lose all their decent qualities in connection with this noble beast. I don't mean men like me nor Asa. I'm a backslider, an' Asa, though an elder, is constitutionally dishonest. I still claim, however, that the trade was fair between us two. I knew his hoss balked

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an' he knew my hoss was lame. I did n't know quite how bad a balker his hoss was, an' he did n't know how dreadful lame my hoss was. When I tried his hoss, she had n't done no work for a coupla days, she was full of oats, an' showed no sign o' stoppin'. The one I traded had been rubbed an' worked over an' 'anoointed with ile,' as the Bible says, an' hardly limped at all. I thought I got the best o' the bargain, for the Elder was never able to drive my hoss, but the balky mare he turned over to me has been a thorn in the flesh, an' I'm not sure I did n't get the wust of the bargain after all."

When Jude finished his story, the church clock had just struck "ten," and he and the minister rose to go. He had not enjoyed his evening. He had heard the name of Fred Miller too many times. He was no longer confident, but he was more determined than ever, and he bade Alice good-night with a grim smile and a good grip of the hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE preacher was walking in his garden. Up and down the paths he went, evidently in deep thought, evidently trying to settle a puzzling question. He had two sermons in his pocket; which should he preach? The first was from the text, "So fight I, not as one that beateth the air," and its object was to teach the necessity of combating evil aggressively. It was advocacy of a church militant. Its second purpose was to defend his attack on the Midianites, which he knew was severely criticized by members of his congregation.

The other sermon had been written afterward and hastily, with the hope of helping Mr. Warner. He realized that this was an act so Quixotic that only success could warrant it. He knew that the latter sermon would be condemned by his friends and that it would bring joy and comfort to his enemies. If he sacrificed himself, would he help Mr. Warner? It was a difficult question to answer.

John Gray had never lacked courage, and the daring and generous act tempted him so strongly that he felt he must not let his inclination move him.

It lacked a full half-hour of the time for service. The village was resting under the spell of the Sabbath quiet, a peace something more than mere stillness, when he was startled by an awful cry like that of some strange wild beast, followed by a shriek of agony, and then silence. For a moment his heart stood still, and he could not move, then he ran to his front gate, just as Alice Hale reached her own.

"What was it?" she asked, white and breathless.

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Gray shook his head. Asa appeared at the door of his shop, asked the same question and received no answer. Abby opened her green blinds, and stretched her long neck out of her window, and Elder Belcher appeared on his front piazza.

They all looked down the road, from which direction the cry had come, and suddenly the old gray stableman came staggering out of Pasco's stable.

"Help!" he cried faintly, and then frantically, "Help! Help! Help!" as he waved his arms wildly over his head.

Gray was the first to reach the stable, followed by Alice, Asa, and Belcher. Tom Lunn appeared and there was a rapidly increasing crowd about the hostler, who led the way into the barn. He was still unable to express himself, and could only point to Goldie B.'s stall. Coming in from the sunlight, they could at first see only a motionless body lying on the straw close to the wooden partition on the mare's nigh side. Then Abby exclaimed, "Good God! it's Pasco," and the old hostler nodded his head helplessly.

Only when Gray started toward the stall did he regain his power of speech, and cried out, "Don't, Preacher! she'll kill you."

For a moment Gray hesitated, for the mare was an awful sight. No longer sleek and kind, she had "gone Berserker." Her eyes were rolling, showing the whites, her lips were drawn back from her teeth, and flecked with blood and foam, which dripped down on her chest and legs. She had drawn herself together so that her back was humped in a strange contortion, and she kept turning her head from one side to the other to watch those behind her. She lashed out furiously when Gray approached.

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Her back and haunches were seamed and welted by countless blows.

"Shoot her!" cried Asa.

"If you do she'll fall on Pasco and crush his life out," warned Belcher.

"Let some one stand in the next stall and take him when I lift," commanded Gray.

"Don't!" warned Belcher. Alice Hale started forward as if to speak, but did not. Suddenly Jude appeared and caught the preacher by the sleeve.

"This is my job," he declared.

Gray broke from the restraining hand. "I say 'tis mine! May God have mercy on his soul!" Indeed, it was not Pasco's body, appealing in its helplessness, nor his ebbing life that the preacher thought of, but of the bad man's soul in jeopardy if he died in his sins.

He sprang forward so quickly that he escaped the mare's flying hoofs; he lifted the inert body and passed it to Jude's waiting hands. The mare tried to reach the preacher, and tore his sleeve with her sharp teeth, then she threw her body violently to crush him against the partition, but she was a second late and the preacher had vaulted over and was safe. In her disappointment the mare gave utterance to a strange cry, pulled fiercely at her halter, and worried the rope with her teeth.

There was a muffled cheer as Gray came from the stall, and Alice Hale said, "Thank God!" with trembling lips and luminous eyes. The preacher found Pasco stretched on a blanket in the middle of the floor, his head in Jude's lap, and the tears from Jude's eyes were falling on Pasco's rigid face. This was un mutilated, but the head was torn and shapeless, with a gaping wound from which oozed blood and brains. It was easy to see that Pasco,

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though he was breathing faintly, had but a few minutes to live.

Tom Lunn produced a flask from his pocket and they forced a few drops between the clenched teeth. They tore open his shirt and found his chest was crushed and his ribs broken. John Gray called to him in the hope that he might make a final appeal, or give some consolation to the departing soul, but Pasco was beyond the reach of any human voice. His breathing grew fainter, and then ceased altogether.

Jude looked up appealingly and said, "Can't you pray for him, Pastor?"

It was contrary to the ingrained belief of a lifetime for the preacher to pray for one dead. He believed, or thought he did, that with death the books were closed and a sinner must give an account for the balance, as it stood. In spite of this, John Gray prayed, and those around him fell on their knees. He prayed that God in His mercy would find some thought or deed which might save the sinful man in His presence from eternal hell. He prayed that God would forgive any negligence of His servants in their duties, when faithfulness might have brought this wanderer into the fold. He hardly knew what he said, but when he had finished and they all murmured "Amen" together, there came to them some relief from the horror that possessed them.

They took Pasco's body and placed it in an empty stall on some clean straw. There was added sadness in the tragedy, for Pasco had loved the little mare and had been prouder of her than anything on earth. He had treated her well, and now and then caressed her when no one was looking. She, on her part, had looked to Pasco as her God, and given him her very best, until driven mad by abuse.

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The old hostler told how Pasco had come into the stable crazy with drink and anger, and had cursed the mare until he was black in the face. Then he had lost all control of himself, and had taken a whip and beaten her until the whip was in pieces. The old man's teeth chattered as he described the terrible beating, and the low, almost human cries of pain, fear, and anger which the mare had made. At last she had become as furious as her master. She had lashed out with her heels, and struggled to break her halter, until, exhausted, the poor beast had crumpled up and fallen in the stall. This was too much for the man, and he had run away, leaving no one in the stable but Pasco. What happened after, no one certainly knew. It was supposed that Pasco, in spite of the beating he had given the mare, had later gone into her stall without a thought of fear. It was believed that the mare had first struck him on the head with her sharp teeth, giving the terrible cry of rage and satisfied revenge that had aroused the village. She had crushed his skull, and when her master had fallen in the straw, she had worried his unconscious body.

She continued to turn from right to left with malevolent eyes, and lashed out viciously with her heels at any one who approached. The men were discussing whether the mare should be shot when suddenly there came the sound of the church bell giving its call to worship.

John Gray took his last look at Pasco's Tripp's dead face. The mocking smile still lingered. Even death had not obliterated the evil lines or given it an expression of calm and dignity. The preacher's lips moved, but only in silent prayer, and then he turned and went out of the stable. All followed him but Jude, who would not leave the body of the man he loved.

John Gray asked himself many questions: Was Pasco

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Tripp "possessed of a devil"? Was there any hope of forgiveness for one who had died in his sin without repentance or prayer for forgiveness? Could he, God's under-shepherd, have saved the man from such a death if he had done his full duty?

Most of the little procession were as silent as their leader, but already some of the horror had disappeared and Abby's tongue was clacking about how she'd always predicted that Pasco would come to some bad end. Tom Lunn was telling a late comer how he was just "startin' for the stall" when the preacher jumped in ahead of him, and Asa was preaching an extempore sermon from the text, "The wages of sin is death." They all agreed, however, that John Gray was a real hero, and they followed in his footsteps with words and looks of admiration.

So engrossed in thought was the preacher, however, that when he came to his gate he went into his house without a word.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE news of the tragedy had not reached the church. All those in the lower village had run to the stable, and those approaching from the east had stopped there. Those in the upper village and from the west had gathered at the church as usual; there was the little group in the horse shed, Deacon Harding was in his seat, Mrs. Lawton, Mr. and Mrs. Davis, Mr. Hobbs, Jared Small, and others from the country and the mountain beyond.

But where were Belcher, Abby, and many other regular attendants? What had happened to Asa? He had not failed to unlock the church door for twenty years, but this morning the honor fell on Ira Harp, who also had a key. Ira was tolling the second bell when Deacon Harding left his seat, came down the aisle, and said:

"Ira, what do you suppose has happened? The whole lower village has stayed away, and even the preacher has n't come."

"Strange, is n't it?" replied Ira; "nothin' but death or the chance to make a dollar would keep Asa."

As he spoke, there was the sound of approaching footsteps and an excited and noisy crowd filed in, led by Abby, who was the first to announce, breathless but triumphant, "Pasco Tripp's dead. The mare killed him."

She hurried into the church and made the same announcement, her voice shrill and discordant. There had never been such an occasion in the history of the Wesley Methodist Church. Its decorous silence was broken by clacking tongues, eager in question and answer. The worshipers gathered in the aisles, and in the corners of

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the room, Abby and Asa having the largest audiences, being the most voluble. Ira only stuck to his task of tolling the bell, waiting for the preacher to appear.

There were some contradictions as to the circumstances of the tragedy, but all agreed that John Gray was a real hero, a real man, and a pastor of whom to be proud. Even Asa, forgetting his enmity, was enthusiastic.

"He walked into that stall like Daniel into the den of lions."

"Jest as I was a-goin' in, he stepped right in front of me," interposed Tom Lunn, but no one noticed him. It was the first time Tom had been to church for many months.

"Jude tried to hold him back," rumbled Belcher, "but nothin' could stop him. He knew how Pasco'd treated him too. 'T was a mighty fine thing to do. There ought to be a testimonial or somethin'."

Abby, holding forth in the middle aisle with a little group around her, was telling her tale. "The mare caught him by the sleeve an' tore it. 'T was V-shaped an' ragged. I don't b'lieve that Linda can fix it so it'll be fit to be seen."

"Did it hurt his arm?" asked Mrs. Davis.

"Like's not," replied Abby. "He would n't say nothin' if his arm was bit off. I never seen nothin' so brave in all my life."

John Gray was a full ten minutes late, for Linda had hastily stitched the rent in his coat. When he mounted to the platform from his little room and looked down on his congregation, his face grew dark. He raised his hand, the clacking tongues stilled, and when the worshipers took their seats, he said:

"We should be silent and thoughtful in the presence of

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death. God's ways are mysterious, yet we must trust Him. Let us pray."

As he lifted his hands all eyes were drawn to the tear in his sleeve, and when the heads were bowed he prayed fervently that the church and he himself might be forgiven for all remissness in the battle against sin, and in the struggle to save sinners.

The hymns and the Bible reading had, of course, been selected long before and with no reference to the tragedy, and they seemed out of touch with the thoughts of the congregation. Before the preacher began his sermon, he said:

"While we should not forget the events of the morning, we must turn our minds to another lesson from God's book. I have chosen for my text, 'They spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.'"

He had decided to preach the sermon he had written after he had talked with Mr. Warner. It had been hastily written, he knew it would antagonize many in his congregation, yet he did not hesitate.

He began by describing the city of Athens and Mars Hill on which Paul stood. He explained the character of the Athenians, with their love of beauty, their fickleness and desire for change. He declared that the wish for novelty was inherent and natural in every human being. It was, however, most extreme in childhood, and with years and wisdom this desire should be more and more restrained. Lack of control was a sign of weakness, and in its place should come a love for the things which had been tried and found to be worthy and beautiful. There should come to every one a spirit of loyalty, which could not easily be affected by light and casual things. There was loyalty to country, to family, and to church. There was

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loyalty to party, to creed, and to friends. There were some who were attracted by any new idea or principle, no matter how little it really had to commend itself to reason.

When he spoke of loyalty to party, there were some smiles at Elder Crocker, who, long a staunch supporter of Republicanism, had gone over to "free silver." But when the minister spoke of loyalty to church and creed, there were knowing glances at the score or more members of the Baptist Church who were in the congregation. They, on their part, were either uncomfortable or resentful, as their faces plainly showed. The minister called attention to the fact that, besides the great bodies of Methodism in the North and South, there were others calling themselves Methodists who differed but slightly from the parent body. There were, of course, in every church those who, as the result of thought and study, had found it necessary to change from one denomination to another. In some cases this was undoubtedly a worthy and a necessary step. There was no excuse, however, for a man leaving a church to which he belonged and a creed to which he could subscribe, and going to another church of another creed simply for the gratification of a temporary inclination and for the desire of hearing something new.

"There is," said he, "a great sister church, which among the Protestant bodies of America stands second only in numbers to the Methodists. This church is based upon the belief that baptism by immersion is the first, the primitive form, and that in this manner was Christ baptized by John in the Jordan. They believe also that there is something symbolic in baptism by immersion, and that it expresses a certain truth which must be emphasized. Thirdly, they believe that baptism by immersion is so es-

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sential that a person not baptized in this manner should not be invited to partake of the Lord's Supper with them.

"On this last point I can only say I have for it no sympathy, although I must respect those who honestly believe it. Concerning the first and second points I confess I have great respect. No Christian questions that baptism by immersion is proper and satisfactory. There are few who deny that it was the ceremonial of the early church. In confirmation of the second claim, we are quoted, 'We are buried with him by baptism into death, that, like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.' It is not my purpose this morning to argue how far spiritual baptism should be allowed to take the place of the physical only or how far it is permitted to change the form of physical baptism. The Methodist Church recognizes other forms, but those who believe that immersion is the only form of baptism should remain in a Baptist church.

"We have here in the village of Wesley a church, the leader of which is a consecrated servant of the Lord. He has labored in season and out of season. He has devoted himself heart and soul to the flock under his charge. They should not wander to other folds and to other shepherds."

When John Gray finished, there was astonishment and almost consternation in his audience. He had said, as plainly as possible to a considerable part of his congregation, that they should leave the church where they were worshiping and return to the one where their names were enrolled. Most of them were very angry. Almost as much offense had been given to the members of the Methodist Church. They were pleased at the increase

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of their numbers, and some, like Elder Crocker, by the addition to their contributions. There were few who sympathized with what John Gray had said, but some understood how much courage, sincerity, and generosity it had required for him to give the message of the morning, and his friends were loyal to him. Never in all the annals of Wesley had there been a Sunday on which had occurred two such startling events as the death of Pasco Tripp and John Gray's sermon on loyalty.

Many of the members of the Wesley Methodist Church were as changeable as the Athenians, and snatched the laurel wreath from the brow of their hero with ruthless hands. When he had gone, Deacon Harding, Elder Crocker, Abby, and Maud were voluble in their denunciation, and all were agreed that there should be a meeting at Crocker's house on Wednesday evening to decide on some action.

John Gray was well aware of the hostility his sermon had aroused, but he walked down the hill to the parsonage, a smile on his face and satisfaction in his heart. He had been sickened by the cheap and sudden admiration of those who were at heart opposed to him and what he believed to be the truth. He was resolved to preach the truth as he saw it, careless of opposition and regardless of consequences.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON the Monday and Tuesday following the sermon by which John Gray had hoped to restore his congregation to Mr. Warner, hardly a word came to him of approval or disapproval. This was ominous. He realized that he was on the thin crust of a volcano, but he went about calmly, and as if nothing unusual had occurred. He was not called upon to officiate at Pasco Tripp's funeral. A lawyer appeared from "The Falls," with Pasco's will, which was an extraordinary document. He had left sums of money to several women unknown to his neighbors in Wesley, but whose claim upon Pasco it was easy to understand. He had willed a level pasture to the village as a perpetual playground, and the stable, with its contents, to "my only friend, Judas Iscariot Burt." He had stated explicitly that his body was to be cremated, and that no service of any kind, religious or otherwise, should commemorate his death.

Following out his determination, the minister had not called on Faith and Alice, although he had received a note from Alice asking him to eat his dinner with them on Thanksgiving Day, which came on the following Thursday.

When Wednesday evening came round, he prepared himself for callers, as usual. His first visitor was Jude, who had some conscientious scruples about taking the stable. These Gray succeeded easily in satisfying.

"I tell you, Pastor, I've got a lot to be thankful for this year," declared Jude, "an' gettin' the stable is n't the best thing that's come to me by a long shot. I've now gone

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to bed sober four Saturday nights runnin'. It's no credit to me, though. You busted the Daniel Webster Club, an' fixed our little meetin's at the studio so I've gone home too full to want my customary load o' rye whiskey. You an' Alice an' Faith have been awful good to me. The Lord must have sent you to Wesley. You've learned me a lot."

"And I know more than I did when I came here two months ago," said Gray. "I've learned something from every one in Wesley, not the least from you, Jude."

"As an awful example of what to avoid, I s'pose you mean," suggested Jude. "If you drop me, I'd be the same old backslider again."

"No, you would n't," contradicted Gray. "The Lord says, 'I will heal their backsliding.'"

"Well, you've helped the Lord a heap," insisted Jude. "I'm like my old stage-coach. You an' Alice an' Faith are the team, you leadin' an' they on the pole. If you stopped pullin', I'd stop mighty quick, an' if the traces was cut, I'd go a-rumblin' an' a-backslidin' downhill an' capsize in a ditch at the bottom."

"No, Jude, you're not the coach, but one of the team pulling your share of the load. What do you suppose my text is for to-morrow?"

"Mebbe 't is, 'Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving,' " ventured Jude.

"No," said Gray, "I'm preaching from your favorite passage in the Bible, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.'"

"Every one will turn an' look at me an' smile. I've 'bout wore them words threadbare."

"You can't wear them out, Jude. When I came to Wesley I was full of a foolish belief in perfection. I had forgotten Christ's 'There is none good but one, that is

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God.' I hope I'll preach as good a sermon as you have done from the same text, 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.'"

"When you talk like that, Preacher, it makes me feel as if I did amount to somethin' after all. I'd 'bout give up hope. I wish I could do somethin' to pay you for all you've done for me. P'r'aps I can. I've got somethin' to tell you."

"What is it, Jude?"

"There's been somethin' like a political caucus. Deacon Harding, Elder Crocker, an' the 'dyed-in-the-wools' had a meetin' to-night at Asa's house. I attended it."

"You!" exclaimed Gray.

"Yes, I was there," declared Jude, "like Joshua among the Philistines. They wanted to put me out, but did n't know jest how to go about it, so I sat it through an' said nuthin' — only listened an' tried to look as if I'd lost my last glim of intelligence."

"Are you sure you ought to tell me this?" asked Gray.

"It ain't no secret," said Jude. "You'll hear it soon enough, unless both Asa an' the Deacon fall down an' break their necks hurryin' over here. They 'low you've done some good in Wesley, but 't ain't accordin' to Methodist rules an' regerlations."

"I'm prepared to meet them," asserted Gray. "The Methodist Church is not as hidebound as they think."

Jude continued: "They say you've preached some sermons that's half Unitarian an' some half Catholic. You've become too liberal altogether. They say you should be told how you're wanderin' an' be p'inted into the straight an' narrer path. The Deacon an' Asa is comin' here to-night to do the p'intin'."

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"Thank you, Jude, I shall be pleased to receive any wise advice they offer."

"They don't like your callin' at the studio so often," suggested Jude doubtfully.

"Why? I'm sorry for that," replied Gray.

"What I'm sorriest about," explained Jude, "is that so many 's ag'in' you for my sake. Some don't like your breakin' down the door o' the Webster Club, though every time I think of how you turned when Belcher went out o' the door with the dummy Bible an' cried out, 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon,' I want to cheer. They say you ought not to have said 'damned bad,' even if you was only quotin' Pasc. You never would have got into this particular trouble if you had n't been helpin' me. I tell you, Parson, I ain't wuth it."

"And I tell you, Jude, you 're worth a good deal more. I'm proud of you."

"Proud o' me!" exclaimed Jude. "My God! Preacher, I gave up hope long ago of ever hearin' words like them ag'in."

As Jude said this, he reached out his hand, took that of the minister, and, rising, went to the fireplace to hide his emotion. As he stood there, the bell rang and Linda admitted Alice and Faith. She was about to show them into the dining-room when Jude called out:

"Come right in. I'm through with the preacher, anyway. What I need is a doctor after the Welsh rabbit Faith cooked last Saturday night."

"Oh, Jude," exclaimed Faith, "you ate too much."

"I only took a little, Faith, jest to please you an' not to hurt your feelin's," explained Jude.

"Tell me, Mr. Gray," inquired Alice, "is there anything wrong in Jude's doing a little work for us to-morrow?"

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He promised before he became the millionaire owner of a livery stable. Can you break Thanksgiving Day — like the Sabbath?"

"If you let him off to hear my sermon, a little work will do him good," replied Gray.

"I'll be on hand," said Jude, "an' you must n't mind if I'm a little high an' mighty. Good-night, I'll see you to-morrow."

When Jude had gone out, Gray turned to his visitors and said:

"I'm glad you've decided to return one of my many calls at last."

"It is 'at last' — a 'vale' and 'farewell.' We're going to the city," said Alice.

"You're going away — from Wesley?" asked Gray.

"Yes," answered Faith. "Alice has sold her Madonna to Mr. Brown, the New York collector, for heaps of money. Is n't it wonderful?"

"You've sold the picture!" exclaimed Gray.

"Yes," replied Alice, "and I hated to part with it. 'T was almost like selling Faith herself."

"But you see, you're not selling me," asserted Faith. "We're to have a studio together. It's splendid — yet I hate to go away."

"I shall miss you very much," said Gray, looking at Faith.

"Does 'you' mean both of us?" inquired Alice.

Gray turned to her, his eyes answering her challenge.

"Yes. I shall miss you — both."

"That's good of you," declared Alice, smiling at him, with an expression on her face he could not read. "I'm sorry to leave Wesley. I wonder why. No one but Jude has been very kind to me."

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"You seem to be bearing your sorrow — with fortitude," said Gray, a little resentfully. "When do you go?"

"Day after to-morrow, if we can get away. That's why we want Jude to help us pack," explained Faith.

"You mean to leave your lover to escape all punishment?" asked Gray.

"Why should I punish him?" asked Faith.

At this the minister shook his head, realizing how impossible it was to argue with her. "I cannot tell you how sorry I am to have you go away."

"Both of us?" asked Alice, the same strange expression coming back to her face.

Gray's eyes met hers, and he answered, speaking slowly:

"Yes, both of you. I shall miss your lessons."

"I hope you'll remember them," she said. "Preach less hell and more heaven, less law and more love; remember Jude's 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.' If you keep this in mind, and that men have bodies and senses as well as souls and aspirations, you may forget your teacher as soon as you like."

"I shall not forget her," replied Gray.

"Good!" exclaimed Alice. "Come, Faith, let's leave him in this mood before he changes. Good-bye."

As she said this, Gray turned from her, as if he had not seen her hand, and bade Faith, "Good-bye." Then he turned to Alice, and, taking her hand in his, looked into her eyes a long time before he spoke. "I shall not forget you. Good-bye, Faith, God bless you," and then, turning again to Alice, he said, "May God bless you, too."

Faith went out first, and Alice gave him one glance before she closed the door. He stood looking absent-minded.

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edly at it for a long time, then walked up and down the room until the bell rang, and Deacon Harding and Elder Crocker entered.

They took their seats in front of his desk, and waited for the minister to speak first, evidently rather embarrassed by their errand; but he only looked at them. At last Harding cleared his throat and said:

"We — me and Asa — have come to see you to-night on a matter of great importance."

"You know me an' the Deacon has always been your very best friends in the church," declared Crocker.

Still Gray did not answer, which was awkward for his visitors, and Harding was forced to speak again.

"We recognize that the church has flourished under your ministrations, that the members have been quickened and sinners have come to the mercy seat. We are glad to see so many of the young people on Sunday mornings. You have labored with us in season and out of season."

"Yes," joined in Crocker, "an' the collections have more'n doubled. You've been liberal, too. It cost a lot to have that clock-man come up from the city an' fix the works so they'd run so good."

Again they waited, and this time Gray broke the silence with a cryptic, "But?"

"But what?" inquired Crocker wonderingly.

"I'm waiting to learn," declared Gray. "You have not come here solely to tell me this."

"We have not," answered Harding stiffly. "We propose to tell you in what you have fallen short. Your first sermon was on Gideon. I think you've forgotten the high standard you set for the church then. You've lost your fervor against sin."

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"Yes," interrupted Crocker, "you've changed a heap, Pastor. You — you don't know how you've changed. When you fust come, your face was serious — an' — an' you spoke with a solemn voice. Now, you're smilin' jest like any worldly person."

"Have you forgotten the Day of Judgment and the punishment that waits the ungodly?" asked Harding.

"I think God's law and purpose were never clearer to me than they are to-day," was Gray's answer.

"You've brought in a lot of new things," asserted Crocker. "You're movin' too fast for us."

At this moment the clock in the church belfry struck "eight." The Deacon and Crocker looked at their watches, and the pastor smiled as he saw them.

"I'm a minute slow," declared Harding.

"I'm right on the tick," said Crocker proudly.

"You trust the meeting-house clock — now, do you?" asked Gray. "Do you think it right?"

"There's no better time-keeper in this State," asserted Crocker.

At this Gray smiled. "Yet when I came to you it lost ten minutes every day. The church was like its clock. I was almost as bad. I think the church, its clock, and pastor now are nearer right than then."

"I say the church and pastor are ahead of time, movin' too fast for any Methodist church," declared Harding.

And Crocker joined in with, "An' your Wednesday evenings are too much like confessionals for me."

"And yet you're here," said Gray. "This is a Wednesday evening."

"But we're not confessin' our sins," explained Crocker.

"No, Elder, they're mine you're confessing," retorted Gray.

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"And we shall not hesitate to tell them," asserted Harding. "Do you think a minister of the Methodist Church should break the law and fight an unbeliever?"

"The Methodist Church has always been a church militant," answered Gray. "John Wesley, for whom this very village was named, did not handle sin or sinners with gloves."

"Did he ever say 'damn'?" inquired Crocker.

At this Gray smiled broadly. "Yes, it was a favorite word with him."

At Gray's smile, Harding's face darkened. "You don't seem to be taking our advice in a friendly spirit. You must agree with us — or go."

At this threat, Gray's eyes flashed. "I don't like the word 'must,' and agreeing is a matter of the mind and not of the will."

"How did you ever come to preach that Baptist sermon?" inquired Crocker excitedly. "Do you know, you drove away more'n twenty people, an' the collections have fallen off a heap?"

"I'm glad they've gone," replied Gray. "I do not believe in proselyting nor do I believe in hurting a good man like Mr. Warner, who is conscientiously doing his duty in the sight of God."

"You're neglecting your duties in calling on your flock," declared Harding.

"I have visited every member of this church at least once," replied Gray.

"An' some of the flock a good many more times," sneered Crocker. "How often have you called on Miss Hale an' Faith?"

"How many times?" exclaimed Gray. "I'm sure I don't know."

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"Yes," continued Crocker, "one an unbeliever an' the other a backslider. You've had supper with them an' Jude four Saturday nights a-runnin'."

"And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, this man receiveth sinners and eateth with them," quoted Gray.

"Are Asa an' me supposed to be the Pharisees?" inquired Harding.

"I think the coat fits you perfectly," answered Gray, speaking slowly and distinctly.

"You do, do you?" exclaimed Crocker. "Then you need n't try to dodge the question. I can tell you how often you've visited that ungodly place with its naked statues standin' all about. Seventeen times — leastwise that we are sure of. An' Sister Green an' Maud across the street you've seen just once."

"And Sister Green has kept the record?" asked Gray.

"Yes, here it is," replied Crocker, taking a paper from his pocket. "It's either Abby or Maud, I don't know which. The fust week you called once, the next week twice, an' frequenter an' frequenter until last week, when you let up again. You met Miss Hale once by the river after dark."

"Did I?" asked Gray. "Can you tell me how long I stayed on my calls?"

"The record ain't complete," supplied Harding. "Sometimes they caught you coming and sometimes going."

"Caught me!" exclaimed Gray. "Saw me, you mean. Sister Green is not a detective."

"Not precisely," declared Crocker, "but she's trustworthy. Here's one day you stayed from nine o'clock till 'most 'leven, an' here's some memorandums I can't

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make out. Oh, now I have it. 'Faith away, Alice Hale all alone.' What do you think o' that, Deacon?" Then, turning to Gray, he asked solemnly and with an air of suspicion, "What was you a-doin' for two hours alone with Miss Hale in the studio? I say it was scand'lous."

At this Gray rose to his feet, his jaw set, and his eyes flashing. He touched the bell on his desk, and, when Linda appeared, he said, "Linda, will you bring Elder Crocker's hat and coat?"

Linda brought them and held them out to the Elder, who was silent from surprise and did not take them.

"What's this for?" he exclaimed. "I ain't half through. I ain't goin' yet."

"Yes, Elder Crocker," declared Gray, "you are going now. There was nothing wrong in my call on Miss Hale and no scandal except in your and Miss Green's mind. Go, I say. You are an old man or you had gone before."

So determined and almost threatening was the attitude of the preacher that Crocker took his coat and hat and backed toward the door. Here he paused for a moment, but, when Gray started for him, he made a hasty exit, without uttering the words that were trembling on his lips.

"I'm going, too," declared Harding, rising.

"Sit down, Deacon," commanded the minister; "I want a word with you."

"I came with Asa," replied Harding, "and I will go with him. It's an awful thing for the pastor of a Methodist church to put one of his elders out, threatening violence."

"There are some insults even a clergyman cannot take," asserted Gray. "I should have been patient to the last had he not insulted Miss Hale, too. I am calm enough and I must talk with you." The Deacon hesitated and the

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minister pointed to the chair, and insisted, "Sit down and listen to me."

So peremptory was he that Harding dropped into his seat, protesting, "You're forgetting yourself, and you'll have to answer for this. The whole thing will go before the Presiding Elder."

"Yes," assented Gray, "the whole thing; and now I have a few words for you alone. Miss Hale and Faith are going away."

"Faith is going away!" exclaimed Harding.

"Yes," said Gray, "and Miss Hale. I shall make but one more call on them."

Harding was greatly agitated, and his lip trembled when he asked:

"Where's Faith going? I don't care where she goes."

"To New York," answered Gray. "You should care where she goes. You do care. You're a good man, Deacon; you've had great trouble, and I'm sorry for you. But you have n't taken it right. You've hardened your heart."

"I will not wink at sin, as you have done," declared Harding.

"Listen to me," commanded the preacher. "The Bible says, 'If thy brother trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent, thou shalt forgive him.' Faith is your own child, nearer than any brother. She has trespassed but once, she has repented, and yet you have not forgiven her. You have carried your resentment too far. You're guilty of sin much greater than hers."

At this Harding started to rise, but Gray pointed so sternly to his seat that the Deacon sank back unwillingly into his chair.

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"She will not tell me who has wronged her," he protested.

"What has this to do with your forgiveness?" asked Gray. "I warn you, Deacon, as your pastor, that you are in danger of the unpardonable sin — that against the Holy Ghost."

"What would you have me do?" asked Harding, impressed by the solemn words and manner of the minister.

"Go to her to-morrow," replied Gray, more sympathetically. "It is Thanksgiving Day. Ask her no questions, make no conditions, take her back. Forgive her."

At this Harding rose and said, "I cannot answer you to-night. I will go home and think it over. I'm an old man, and my heart is very sore."

The minister followed Harding to the door, and took his hand.

"Go home and pray. I'm sure you'll see the light."

After the Deacon had gone, the minister went back to his desk, but it was not of Harding or Faith that he thought. Alice Hale was going away. In his confusion at her farewell call and the announcement of her departure, he had forgotten that he was to have his Thanksgiving dinner at the studio.

What should he say to Alice? Fred Miller was not a good man. He had no right to marry her. Still, that was something which only Alice Hale could decide. He was arguing the matter out with himself, when the door-bell rang, and French and Belcher came in, hurriedly and plainly troubled. French had just that day returned from his sojourn in the woods, and looked hard and brown.

"Have the Deacon and Asa been here?" he asked.

"Yes, and gone," replied the preacher, smiling.

"That's too bad," declared Belcher, wiping his fore-

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head with his handkerchief. "We hoped to get here before they'd left. I wanted to meet Asa face to face."

"We know about what they've told you," said David. "But you must n't believe them. All the young people and some of the older ones are on your side."

"I'll tell you, Pastor," interrupted Belcher, "they're only a passel o' soreheads that's used to runnin' things as they like. We've got a fightin' chance. We'll beat 'em when it comes to a vote."

"But this is a church, not a ward meeting," suggested Gray.

"Well," asserted Belcher, "the majority rules in both cases. There's as much politics in the Methodist Church as there is in town meetin', an' the majority don't give much sympathy to them that's got a few less votes. The trouble'll smooth over if you use a little diplomacy. Preach a sermon on hell an' damnation. Give the Deacon an' Asa a few soft words. They're like balky hosses — a measure of oats is better than the gad an' rough words."

Gray listened and shook his head. "Elder Belcher, I'm not a diplomat. I am God's minister. I sent Crocker from this room to-night. I told Deacon Harding that he was a greater sinner than his daughter Faith, not five minutes ago."

"Whew!" exclaimed Belcher, "you told the Deacon that? An' showed Asa the door? Honest, Pastor, I'm sorry. It's goin' to hurt us, an' hurt us bad. Faith's our weak p'int. They think she ought to be expelled. Mind you, I don't, nor David. We voted for her, did n't we, David?"

"Yes," replied French, "we voted for her."

Belcher continued: "Asa made a lot at the meetin' to-night of your callin' at the studio. They don't like Miss

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Hale, nuther. She's too outspoken to suit Wesley, an' she's too pretty to please the mothers of ugly gals. You won't be mad if I give you a word of advice, Pastor? You know how fond I am of you."

"There's nothing you could say that would offend me," answered Gray.

"Well, it's only this," said Belcher, a little doubtfully. "Don't call so often at the studio. You're not mad at me, are you, Pastor?"

"No, Elder," replied Gray, "I'm not even hurt. I promise you that after to-morrow I will not call at the studio again."

"You're awful good," declared Belcher, "but you need n't go as fur as that. Call at the studio, say, once a week."

"I shall call at the studio to-morrow morning," answered Gray, "and then, never again." He said this with a peculiar smile, which French noticed, but which did not catch Belcher's eye.

"That's fine, Pastor," he declared, rising. "Come, Dave, let's be goin'."

But Elder French did not rise. His eyes were fixed on Gray's face, as if he would read his inmost thoughts, and he said:

"I'll stop a little longer, 'Lige."

"Well, good-night, both, I'll see you to-morrow," and Belcher left the two young men together.

"Why did you smile when you said 'never again,'" asked French.

"Because Alice and Faith are going away," replied the minister.

"Leaving Wesley — for good?" exclaimed French, rising to his feet.

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"Yes, for good," answered Gray, looking wonderingly at French, who was evidently greatly moved, his face working and his hands clenched.

"Faith shall not go!" he exclaimed.

"Faith shall not go?" repeated Gray. "Why, I don't understand. My God! I do, then. Tell me why."

For a moment there was silence, and then French answered, his face growing white under the tan, "Because Faith's mine — Faith — and her baby."

Gray listened with an expression almost of horror. Then he rose to his feet and, pointing his finger at French, said, "You are the man!"

And French bowed his head, and replied, "I am the man."

At this Gray turned and walked to the fireplace. French covered his face, and neither spoke for a long time. Suddenly French dropped his hands and extended them toward Gray entreatingly, his face twisted with shame and emotion.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "listen to me. I have carried this load on my chest till I can't breathe. Listen, or I'll choke to death."

Gray did not turn when he said, "I'll listen."

"'T was a year ago last spring," declared French. "I noticed Faith's eyes were following me. She smiled and blushed when we met. At first I did n't care, but one night I walked home with her from meeting. She said, 'Good-night,' the gate between us, her face close to mine. I kissed her. I don't suppose you understand."

"Go on," said Gray, still keeping his eyes on the fire.

"I did n't love her," continued French, "but that kiss fired my blood. Morning, noon, and night temptation came to me. I fought it harder than Jude ever fought

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rum. What's drink to a thirst like that? 'T was a losing fight, and at last I — sinned. Of course, you — Pastor, cannot understand."

At this Gray turned and faced French. "I understand the temptation and the sin, but not the cowardice."

"The cowardice!" exclaimed French.

"Yes, the cowardice," repeated Gray. "When she was in trouble, why did you let her bear the load alone? Poor little girl!"

"Stop, Pastor," cried French, "you're going too far. I'm bad enough, but not a yellow dog like that. As soon as I knew, I offered to marry her. Good God! What do you take me for?"

"She would n't marry you?" exclaimed Gray wonderingly.

"She asked me if I loved her," declared French. "I lied and said I did."

"'T was wrong, David, but I've known worse lies than that," declared Gray, for the first time showing some sign of relenting in the tones of his voice.

"Again she asked, 'Do you love me, David?'" continued French. "She drew my face close to hers and looked straight into my eyes. Then she shook her head and said, 'No, David, you don't love me. I will not marry you,' and went away."

"You might have given her money enough to live comfortably. Why did n't you?" asked the minister.

"Do you think I did n't try?" replied French. "She would n't take a cent from me. She said 't would seem as if she had — sold herself."

"You could have made confession and shouldered half the load," suggested Gray.

"She would n't let me," declared French. "She said,

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'What good will it do me to spoil your life and hurt the church?' She made a lot of that and of my being an elder. I tried my best with her, but she said she only asked this one little thing of me — silence."

"How could you help loving her?" exclaimed Gray.

"I do love her, now," replied French. "Day by day, she's been creeping into my heart, and when you told me she was going away, at last I knew."

"Perhaps Faith will forgive you," said Gray. "But there's another you've sinned against."

"Yes, I know," replied French, "and God knows I'm sorry and I'll do all I can to make things right."

"Then listen," declared Gray; "I've come to believe that sins may be stepping-stones to heaven. You'll stay in the church, and you'll stay its elder, if I can have my way. Give me your hand, we'll pray to-morrow may be a real Thanksgiving Day for both of us."

CHAPTER XXX

It was the morning of Thanksgiving Day, and Alice, Faith, and Jude were busy in the studio. Faith was putting hay in a barrel, Jude was driving nails in a board covering a large packing-case, and Alice was watching him. She said something which made Jude laugh, and careless, too, for he hit his finger with the hammer, and dropping it on the floor, he gave an exclamation of pain and danced about like a Comanche Indian.

"Say it, say it, Jude," advised Alice. "You'll feel better for a naughty word."

"I've got just the one I want in my vocabulary," asserted Jude, "only I dassent use it, seein' I'm more or less on probation. Darn ain't enough, an' I'd like to use another word beginnin' with 'd' that comes nearer fittin' the occasion."

"All right, Jude, I'll help you," said Alice. "Damn!"

"Thank you, Alice," replied Jude; "you're good to me, but if I tried to smile, 't would crack my face. It's a hard old Thanksgiving Day for me, with you two girls goin' away. 'T is more like a day of fastin', humiliation, an' prayer, 'spite of the Governor's proclamation. Do you know that the preacher may be goin', too?"

"No. Why?" asked Alice, becoming very serious.

"The Deacon an' Crocker is on the warpath ag'in' him."

"Oh, Jude, are you sure about Father?" asked Faith.

"Yes," replied Jude, "an' that's mighty serious. Your father has more influence than any one else in the church."

"He's done a lot of good in Wesley," declared Alice.

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"He sure has," agreed Jude. "Look at me."

"I'm looking, Jude," replied Alice; "you're wonderful. You've both improved. He was scarcely human when he came here."

"He was human enough when he tackled the Midianites," argued Jude. "You'd oughter seen him wrestlin' Pasco Tripp about. He told me last night, 'I've learned somethin' from every one in Wesley.'"

"Alice has done more for him than all the rest of us put together," said Faith knowingly.

"Thank you, Faith," replied Alice, a hint of sarcasm in her voice. "How observant you've been!"

"I'm not quite blind," retorted Faith.

"Nor dumb, unfortunately," said Alice. "Be careful, or I'll take Jude to New York with me instead of you."

"We'll miss you dreadfully, Jude," declared Faith.

"Miss him!" exclaimed Alice. "I'm heart-broken."

"Look-a-here, girls," protested Jude, "I've been tryin' to swallow an awful lump in my throat all the mornin'. I shall be sheddin' real tears unless somethin' cheerful turns up soon."

At this moment Miss Green appeared in the doorway, and Jude, remarking under his breath, "Here's the answer to my cheerful wish," disappeared in the house.

Faith greeted Abby with a pleasant "Good-morning," which Miss Green ignored.

"'Mornin', Miss Hale," she said, "I see you're all mussed up movin'. What's the sayin', 'Two movin's equal to one fire'? It's either two or three.'"

"I say two," declared Alice, "or perhaps one. Jude's broken a mirror and Faith spilled ink on the parlor carpet. You don't seem to notice Faith. She said 'Good-morning' to you when you came in."

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"I heard her," replied Abby calmly; and continued, "I've come over to return the cup of sugar I borrowed off o' you a spell ago."

"Yes," said Alice, taking the cup from Miss Green's hand. "T was about two months ago, and it was a coffee cup, holding twice what this one does."

"I want to know!" exclaimed Miss Green. "I'm awful absent-minded 'bout little things."

"And some big things, too," corrected Alice. "You have n't spoken to Faith yet. She said 'Good-morning' to you."

"Yes, an' I heard her," replied Miss Green, "an' I don't mean to say nothin' to her."

"Don't, Alice," protested Faith. But Alice was very angry and said, "Miss Green, why did you come here this morning? I'd rather you were rude to me than to Faith."

"I come to pay my just debts," answered Abby, "that's all, an' I ain't weepin' no tears at your goin', nuther."

"Still I'm sure you'll miss us," suggested Alice. "You can't watch us any more through your green blinds."

"Well," declared Miss Green, evidently enjoying the discussion, and feeling herself quite able to win in the battle of words, "no one's afeared o' bein' watched unless they've got somethin' to hide. I've seen how you've been carryin' on with the preacher, an' I told all about it at Elder Crocker's house last evenin'."

Against this assault even Faith protested. "Mr. Gray has called to see us. There was nothing for anybody to be ashamed of."

At this Miss Green turned vindictively, her voice growing shriller.

"You ain't no judge o' shame, Faith Harding. I don't

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want no words with you. I'm an honest woman, I'll have you understand. You gals have got the preacher in an awful mess. It's a lucky thing for Wesley that you're goin' away — both o' you."

With this tirade, Abby took her departure, making a safe retreat before she could be answered.

"The cat!" exclaimed Alice. "You don't mind her, do you, Faith?" putting her hand on her friend's shoulder.

Now that the coast was clear, Jude appeared, with a screw driver in one hand and a rusty hinge in the other. "Look-a-here, Alice, this is only a streak o' rust. It ain't a carpenter you want, it's a magician."

"There's a better hinge in the box on the shelf," replied Alice. "Come, I'll show you where it is."

They went out together, and Faith busied herself with the packing until there came a knock on the door, and she called out cheerfully, "Come in." The door opened slowly, and Deacon Harding entered.

"Oh, Father, I am glad to see you!" she exclaimed.

The Deacon was evidently under a great strain, and he spoke slowly and with difficulty.

"Faith, I'd like to make up with you. Won't you meet me halfway? Won't you tell me who he is?"

"No, Father," answered Faith, "I will not tell. Can't we make up without?"

"The preacher talked awful rough to me last night," declared the Deacon.

"Are you and Crocker trying to drive him away, Father?" inquired Faith reproachfully.

"No, Faith," answered Harding. "I was, but I've changed my mind. I told Crocker so this morning. The Elder can't do anything against the three of us. Mr. Gray will stay where he is."

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"Thank God for that!" exclaimed Faith fervently.

"I've been stiff, I know," admitted the Deacon, "but that's the way God made me, and I've been almost crazy. I don't now see the full right of it, but I'm willing to call by-gones by-gones. Come back to me, Faith. The little house has been dreadful lonesome without you."

"You want to take me back," inquired Faith, "me — and my baby?"

"Yes, Faith, you and your baby," replied Harding.

Faith went to her father, put her arms around his neck, and kissed him. He patted her gently on the head with his stiff fingers.

"Oh, Father, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Faith.

"We'll have our Thanksgiving dinner just as in the old days when you were a little girl," declared Harding.

"No, Father," replied Faith, "I shall never be a little girl again. I'm going away with Alice. But we'll come back in the spring, and I'll make you little visits every few weeks."

"You ain't holding anything against me, Faith?" asked the Deacon.

"No, Father," she replied, "by-gones are really by-gones, and I'll sit with you in church this morning. Besides, you shall have your dinner with me here."

"It's dreadful hard, Faith," remonstrated the Deacon. "I'd set my heart on having you home again. Perhaps you'll change your mind. I'd be awful good to you."

"I'm sure you would," replied Faith.

"Well, I'll come to dinner with you here, and we'll go to church together."

Faith kissed and embraced her father, and after he had gone, she wiped the tears from her eyes and ran smiling out of the door to tell the news to Alice and Jude.

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She had barely gone when there came a knock at the door, then another, and finally Frederick Miller entered. He was very handsomely dressed and appeared confident and happy. His expression changed, however, when the door opened and John Gray entered without knocking.

"Good-morning, Mr. Miller," he said.

"Good-morning," replied Miller, a sneer on his face. "Is n't it customary to knock on the door where you came from?"

"It is," replied the minister calmly, "unless you have been told to dispense with the formality."

"As well acquainted as that in two months?" exclaimed Miller. "Not bad, even for a minister."

"Why 'even for a minister'?" inquired Gray, still calm to outward appearance, but his temper rising.

"Because they're past-masters in the art of making friends — with women. You've hung about this studio until the whole village talks about it. I say that you shall stop hanging around Miss Hale."

"Have you the right to speak for her?" asked Gray.

"I'm engaged to marry her," declared Miller. "She has my ring upon her finger now. I have an appointment to see her. We prefer to be alone. Will you go?"

"No," answered Gray, "not at your order, not until I'm ready, not until she tells me."

"By God!" exclaimed Miller, "I say you shall go."

"By — what you will, I shall not move until I see Miss Hale," replied Gray. "I'd speak to her if she were on her way to church with you."

They stood facing each other, with set faces and blazing eyes, when Alice came to the doorway, just in time to hear the minister's bold speech. They turned at her entrance, and she said:

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"Mr. Gray, will you excuse me for a few minutes? I must talk with Mr. Miller alone. I will see you afterwards. You'll find Faith and Jude in the woodshed."

Gray hesitated a minute and then made his exit, followed with a smile of triumph from Miller. He was about to speak, with extended hands, but Alice stepped back, removed the ring from her finger, and gave it to him, saying:

"I'm sorry, Fred."

"But your promise," protested Miller. "Has your dream man come?"

"My dream man has come," answered Alice.

"It's that damned preacher, then!" exclaimed Miller.

"I'm not saying who it is, and truly I'm very sorry. I shall miss the ring I've worn so long. What a little girl I was when you put it on. Do you remember? I had short dresses and a braid down my back."

"I remember," replied Miller, his face growing angry and sullen. "Do you mean you were not old enough to know your mind?"

"Perhaps, Fred. Besides, I've come to believe there's something more in this world than painting pictures and making money, as you and I have done. There's something in being good and doing good. Funny for me, is n't it?"

"I don't see the fun," replied Miller. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Fred," said Alice; "do not think too hard of me."

She held out her hand, but Miller would not notice it, and left without another word.

Miller's departure was plainly visible from the woodshed, and the sound of his footsteps had hardly died away when John Gray entered. Alice was leaning against one

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of the packing-cases when he entered, and she spoke quite calmly:

"Faith's father has just been here. He has forgiven her, and they will sit together at church this morning. She is very happy. It is all your work, I think."

"She might have been dead but for you," protested Gray.

"She says she's sure the man she loves will come to her soon," said Alice.

"There's reason for her faith," declared Gray. "He came to me last night. It was her loyalty that reached his heart at last. Her going away made him conscious of his love."

"He is not worthy of her," protested Alice.

"No man is good enough," declared Gray. "There is something of the Madonna about her."

"Yes," agreed Alice; "how wonderfully she worked into the picture. I'll paint another for myself sometime. Do you remember when you saw it first?"

"Yes," replied Gray; "I remember the picture and the statue and the fruit and the sermon that you preached to me. What a hidebound fool I was that day!"

"Thank God, you're better now."

As she spoke, Gray suddenly sprang forward, coming close to her, and demanded, "Let me see your hand."

Alice clasped her fingers behind her back, and asked, "Which hand? Why?"

"Let me see your hand," again commanded Gray. She held her hands before her, and he exclaimed, "The ring is gone, and Miller too! What does it mean? You cannot play with me."

"I do not want to play with you," she answered seriously, but with a strange smile on her face.

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"You've smiled at me since the first morning when we met. You'll laugh no longer. You must listen to me now. I love you. I have loved you since the moment I held you in my arms and kissed your lips."

"And called me Jezebel," added Alice. "I did it for Faith's sake. I almost hated you. You must believe that. I did not mean to let you kiss my lips. I wonder why I did?"

"Spirit or body moved you, I care not which," declared Gray. "Only love me now. I'll make you love me."

"But I'm — a scarlet woman. You called me that as well as Jezebel."

"No matter what I called you, then!" protested Gray. "I was mad with the first taste of love."

"You're not quite sane to-day," said Alice. "How would I look presiding at the Mothers' Meeting or the Epworth League? The Bible says, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers.'"

"You're not an unbeliever," declared Gray.

"Wait till I finish," interrupted Alice. His hands were stretched out to her, but she shook her head. "Don't touch me. Listen. I'm glad you love me. I might love you, but I won't. I will not spoil your life. Good men are scarce, good ministers are scarcer still. See what you've done in Wesley."

"I wish you'd spare me that," begged Gray.

"First, you fixed the clock," said Alice.

"You shall not laugh at me," he exclaimed.

"I shall not. Wesley was like its clock. You've set it right as well. You wrecked the Daniel Webster Club, and cured Jude of his taste for drink. You fixed Tom Davis's crooked leg, so he is well and strong again. You've brought Ira Harp and Betsy together."

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"What does it matter?" interrupted Gray. "Listen to me, now."

But Alice would not stop. "When you first came to Wesley, I was a pagan. I worshiped beauty only. I had little faith in God, less in man's goodness, still less in what is called religion, least of all in the church. You've half converted me."

"Yours is the miracle," declared Gray. "You've opened my blind eyes."

"Your eyes were blind. I think you're a better man for meeting me — the better for your love. I'll not spoil my work. I will not marry you."

"I say you shall," insisted Gray. "We'll worship God together in some church which will hold us both." He sprang forward, seized her in his arms, and drew her closer to him, in spite of her resistance. He bent over her, his lips close to hers. She was very white and spoke in a voice so low he could hardly hear her.

"I warn you if you kiss me once again — I'll —"

Gray hushed her by pressing his lips to hers.

"What will you do?"

With the kiss, the blood rushed into Alice's face, and she looked up and laughed at him. "I'll marry you — in spite of all."

She was in his arms when the church clock struck ten, and he exclaimed:

"I had forgotten everything. Faith's lover will be here this minute. Come into the garden. We'll send her back alone."

They hurried out just as there came the sound of a knock on the door, then another knock, and still another, after which David French entered slowly. He came into the middle of the room, and stood there, waiting doubt-

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fully, until Faith appeared in the wide doorway. She ran forward quickly and David fell on his knees before her. She bent down over him, and, taking his face in her hands and looking into his eyes, she asked:

"Do you love me, David?"

He looked up to her and answered solemnly:

"Yes, Faith, God knows I love you."

She stooped and kissed him, and lifted him to his feet. They were silent in their great joy, content to look into each other's eyes. As they stood there together, the preacher came slowly forward, leaving Alice and Jude in the doorway. He raised his hands in benediction over the bowed heads, and his voice was vibrant with happiness as he said:

"May God bless you and keep you, may He cause His face to shine upon you and give you peace."

THE END

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